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# Children of the poor



*Presented by  
the Government of  
New Zealand*



**JOHN A. LEE**

**Children  
of  
the poor**

**Whitcombe & Tombs**

*TO daughters of the poor; to errant brats and gutter-snipes; to eaters of left-overs, the wearers of cast-offs. To slaves of the wash-tub and scrub-brush, whose children, nevertheless, go to hell.*

*To teachers who adopt, through compulsion or desire, the method of the barrack square.*

*To juvenile culprits fleeing from the inescapable hand of the law, sometimes called justice.*

*To that world of superior persons whose teeth have never been sharpened by deprivation, whose sensibilities have never quivered from the shame of their poverty.*

*In particular, to those whose birth—inexcusable audacity—may have offended against Holy Law; whose life, against Man's . . .*

### **THIS STORY OF THE GUTTER.**

**"A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord."**

**OLD TESTAMENT**

**"Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me:  
for of such is the kingdom of heaven."**

**NEW TESTAMENT**

© John A. Lee

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# PART ONE

## The tragic sinners

THIS is the story of how I became a thief, and in time very much of an outlaw, running and skulking from the police. And this story may throw light upon the circumstances that made my sister a daughter of the streets, a poorly remunerated and therefore despised member of that oldest profession, which is not unlike any other calling in that its practitioners are honoured and despised according to the quantity rather than the source of their earnings.

And yet this may not be the story, for it may be that we were both vicious while yet in our mother's womb or as we suckled at her distraught and famished breast. If you feel we inherited our criminality, I shall not argue. If you believe that I am wrong when I suggest that factors other than birth contributed to our downfall, that is your privilege. But poorer material has achieved mightier places.

To tell how one became a thief may seem to lack originality. Many great crooks have told of a glittering apprenticeship. Such men can boast of the safes they have dynamited, of their swift "get-aways" with rolls of "crisp banknotes," of a gangster's royal progress to respectability through the use of accumulated wealth. Everyone loves a successful crook. We can all feel kinship for the fellow who steals a fortune. There is a romance in a crook who wears rubber shoes and conceals finger prints with gloves, who hypnotizes a strong room combination with a few physical caresses, who drops with the loot into a Rolls Royce which purrs him on his way to a period of opulent life. Such a crook is the crook of your dreams. But



what of a boy who climbs over a fence to walk away with a load of rattling empty bottles labelled Beer, Sauce, Pickles, Jam? You can scarce touch such a fellow with the novelist's pair of tongs. You can not, as you read by the fireside, imagine yourself stooping so low as to steal less than a cool half million. But this boy was poor. Wealth is relative.

Neither is there glamour about the sister's life. No prince or millionaire sets her up in a lavish, thickly carpeted flat to practise prostitution. She does not amass wealth in vice and retire into respectability. She merely sells her flesh in foul Chinese dens for as many pence as the brother might win from a sack of bottles. Only the mistresses of kings, the courtesans of philosophers, the harlots of merchant princes or movie magnates practise vice glamorously. There is little romance about the prostitution of a girl in a Chinese den. But in this story no lavishly gowned beauty has her favours bid for in a rising market. A creature in man's shape takes a poor child in a print dress and sells her not to the highest bidder but to every bidder.

Some may see, too, the story of a mother on whom the physical urges that surround breeding and sex are too powerful for conventional restraint. The slave and the drudge knows passion—is a daughter of Eve even if too poor to utilize the scientific knowledge available to the clergyman's wife. Or the mother may sell herself for mere bread to feed her hungry brood and, grim paradox, be left consequently with less bread and additional mouths to feed. And tears may be viciously shed over the death of a bastard.

You may say "a rotten stock root and branch," but forgive me if at times I imply that the social system has also a taint that is reflected in these gutter children. I must be partial when I plead for the mother and the girl, although I abandon the boy to the censure of the sanctimonious and the self-righteous. For the boy has learned long since how to endure punishment. I throw him to the wolves of respectability.

Poverty is not a fixed quality. It is necessary to say this, for some people would be happy to wear cast-off trousers. Poverty also is relative. When one boy or girl in a street knows cast-offs, when one family knows left-overs, even if cast-offs mean

warmth and left-overs mean a full belly. that family knows poverty. For man, being more than a brute beast, has a soul as well as a paunch. A jailbird is well clad but his garb is his shame.

This story was put down that I might take stock of my progress, and thus, ascertain what sort of child I was. It is a piece of human accountancy. Some will see only debits, some few an odd credit. Myself, I cannot strike a balance. Draw up the account and judge, I said. But as I look, I grow confused. One is too human to produce a profit and loss account. So vicious am I that out of the gutter I see virtue shining through filth. I hand the balancing on to detached souls who, holding their noses, may condemn from respectable heights.

This is a story of the gutter. The gutter is not of Paris, of London, of New York, alone. The social gutter is of every clime and race, of village as well as of town, of the New World as well as of the Old. There is a broad, deep gutter in British Overseas Dominions. The Southern Cross witnesses poverty no less cruel than Northern stars and constellations, although, until recently, more exceptional. At the moment, the oversea Dominions starve to pay John Bull, the modern Shylock, his pound of interest, and to worship that God of chaos called Deflation.

Also this story should be told in a Scottish dialect that has long ago eluded me. Nor will I swear to the verbal accuracy of recorded conversations, although I can testify to their essential honesty. I should have liked to start my story with "Once upon a time," that old-fashioned beginning that with disuse has become so strikingly fresh, for as a boy I thought all stories should start that way and end with "happily ever afterwards." But this is a boy's story for adults, and "Once-upon-a-time" stories were adult's stories for infants.

## **The location of my gutter**

I HAVE been told that I saw daylight in Dunedin, a southern city of New Zealand, which leans sandhills against rollers and

spray that journey to our shores, unbroken by land, from Antarctica itself. Although the wind and waves come in unbroken array across trackless Southern Ocean to spend their violence against our rock bound coast and sandhill, our climate is not rigorous. For we are an island community isolated in the Southern Ocean by huge expanses of water. Antarctica's breezes reach our coasts because there is no other more southern outpost, but their iciness is much tempered before they strike at our flesh.

My name is Albany Porcello a name which used to cause the curious to stare as they rolled the surname Porcello over their tongues a second time. Porcello 'How often have I heard the word repeated Porcello' No Porcello came from Scotland. My eyes have been averted before those of the curious as the curious searched my countenance for a sign of the foreigner, the outlaw signs that were lacking. Fortunately, perhaps, to have some title to people's interest even if that interest be hostile, for our poverty was certain and my parent age was distinguished only by its obscurity.

New Zealand is set like a gem in the Pacific Ocean. That is how every Pacific Island seems to be set to the reader of Coral Island stories. All imaginary Pacific Islands have the blue sea against blazing sand and tropical fruit in luscious clusters for the appetite of loafing dreamers. Alas, New Zealand is not a tropical island, nor a land of naked brown maidens and lotus. It is a series of three islands with a climate varying from temperate to subtropical, a land of industry with no place for the beachcomber, it is a few inconsiderable red dots at the foot of a generous world map. Dunedin is a black dot superimposed upon the southern end of one of the red ones. Dunedin with one cheek held up towards the Pacific spray, is otherwise a beautifully land locked harbour town.

In days before the various provinces united to form a central New Zealand Government, Dunedin was the capital of the Province of Otago. Otago was settled after 1840 by sturdy Scottish immigrants, who arrived in windjammers. In those days Antipodes meant more than 'down under'. The term imaginatively suggested the edge of the world. The windjammers were those beautiful full rigged ships that moved

Conrad, once turned landsman, to prose ecstasy, although those same vessels afflicted the emigrant with the torments of hell. Voyages varied in length and time according to elemental idiosyncrasy, the seaworthiness of the ship, and the sturdiness and craftsmanship of the crew. In these days of easy travel and comfortable globe trotting, we are inclined to underestimate the hardy spirit and tough physique of pioneers.

To face the physical rigours of the voyage required endurance; to brave the idea of voyaging to the ends of earth required a mental courage and fortitude not demanded of the emigrant of to-day. The physical and mental barriers were stern, selective processes that deterred weaklings. That does not mean that emigrant venturers were invariably respectable. Toughness, rather than respectability, is required when new nations are being hewn from the wilderness, and there is a vagabond type that can adventure and build and endure, a type that stifles in static society. To this type the hazards of unknown territory have the pull of a magnet. Nevertheless, despite the vagabond, Otago was cradled and fashioned by the respectable, God-fearing adventurer rather than by doubting vagabonds who were present only in sufficient number to season the spate of the smug.

Otago was a Scottish settlement. The Scot found the climatic conditions of Otago, despite a greater topographical ruggedness, less rigorous and unyielding than those of his native heath. Unnamed mountains towered aloft into the atmosphere of perpetual snow, mountains that looked westward to the Tasman sea and eastward to the Pacific; huge cold lakes lay in mountain fastnesses unrippled by the movement of human craft, while swift, snow-fed rivers, unbridged and unbridled, impeded expansion northward and southward. But there was heavy, primeval bush that yielded high grade timber to axe and saw; hills covered with virgin grass and waving tussock that were a ready made pasturage for sheep and cattle and, unfortunately, for the verminous rabbit, introduced from abroad. Here and there beside the rivers were rich, alluvial flats and plains of country, easily broken by plough, to be sown in wheat and oat. Around the shores were waters teeming with fish. And more important, the Scot found refuge from

that quondam great scourge of British agriculture: the rack-renting, absentee landlord to whom game preservation had become of greater importance than tenant prosperity.

Even a stranger would have observed the unusualness of Porcello in Dunedin, for Dunedin's origins are beyond escape. Even now in the year 1932, Dunedin's skyline is broken by the spires of Presbyterian Kirks, although the Kirk is no longer called the Kirk, rather than by the tops of tall commercial buildings. The city shops still bear a preponderance of Scottish names. In half a dozen towns of Otago, there are pipe bands, for the Scot introduced his vices as well as his virtues. A few years ago cash athletic clubs, known as Caledonian Societies, abounded; and on New Year's Day in each centre, true national festivals were celebrated. Running, walking, piping, dancing, tossing the caber, wrestling, tartan here and tartan there, each Caledonian gathering was a sacrifice to St. Andrew. The skirl of the pipes used to bring the grey-haired veteran, and the dancing used to bring his grandchildren, and the whole family was enticed and entertained to an extent that mere athletic events never achieve. From end to end of Otago and Southland, from Invercargill to Oamaru on New Year's Day, one saw the bare knees of kilted men.

A Burns Monument stands to-day at the heart of the city, and a stone's throw away, the first "Meenister" of an Otago Kirk is commemorated by another monument. At the foot of High Street is a Cargill monument, and in the Triangle, in these days called Queen's Gardens after a dowdy statue of a dowdy queen, there is a monument to a Captain McAndrew, and throughout the length and breadth of Otago are cairns erected to the memory of this or that Mac, so that whatever the eventual composition of Dunedin's society may be, the indisputable fact is that Dunedin's origins are all Scottish. In those very early days Dunedin was a piece of Scotland, located at the opposite end of the earth.

The discovery of gold lured a host of cosmopolitan adventurers and vagabonds from the corners of the earth. They were no less hardy, if a trifle less respectable, than the original settlers. This influx of international vagrants broke down the original purity a "wee bittie." Also, it prevented Dunedin

from continuing to be overmuch the narrow Presbyterian community, although in the long run the dour Scot tamed the new comer rather than *vice versa* Presbyterian tendencies are as rugged and unyielding as granite. The more worthy, and some of the less worthy, northern characteristics survived, although the more narrow and regulative tendencies may have been weakened. Withal, Dunedin remained sufficiently narrow, a great stickler both for sincere worship of and lip service to the word of God (the said "word" always pronounced with a *u* and a succession of reverberating *r's*)

When the adventurers discovered the limitations of the richness and quality of the goldfields, they either departed to other excitements or persisted to discover what the Scot had discovered long before that there was much gold to be cropped from the soil. Hence, golden fleece was won from the backs of sheep, golden butter was wrung from the cow's udder, and the rich, alluvial flats and the easy-rolling country yielded golden wheat and oats. And there was gold to be won from the processes of manufacture. Untroubled by the Maori wars that beset North Island development, Dunedin became the first industrial centre, and tenaciously retained its position for a number of decades.

Otago had eggs in so many baskets that it managed to prosper amid recurring slumps. Butter, meat, wool, wheat, oats, tallow, hides, timber, flax, gold, coal, fisheries, manufactures, netted a swollen prosperity which was allied to an excessive frugality. The landlocked harbour shores of Dunedin, previously unchanged for a million years, became the home of thriving industry. It is small wonder that Otago had wealth and leisure to devote to the pursuit of the educational amenities in advance of the Northern Provinces. Hence came the founding in Dunedin of Otago University, which remains to this day New Zealand's premier University, although the centre of maximum population has shifted far north and although education long ago passed out of the control of provincial hands and became a charge upon the nation.

The community multiplied in Kirks, in cash and in people, and took care to reinforce its National pride and sentiment with regular shiploads of emigrants from Highland and Low-

land. Many of the secondary industries established by the pioneers still flourish, and to-day bear the family name of the founders, followed, probably, by the addition of the letters "Ltd.," which testifies, that if the community listened diligently to the "wurrd" on Sunday, it laboured acquisitively and skilfully during the remainder of the week. Across the years, Reid and Gray still make ploughs; McLeod, soap; Wilson, malt; Hudson, confectionery and biscuits; Meek, bottles ink, and Thompson, bottles lemonade; Wardell sells groceries at cut rates; Irvine and Stephenson preserve and bottle jams and pastes; Burt builds anything from a steel gold-dredge to a wheelbarrow; Faulkener fabricates iron beds and steel gates; Strachans McGavin and Speights brew beer. How the names seem to fit the trades! And all this activity is engaged in Stuart, St. Andrew, Clyde, St. David, High, Morey and a dozen other streets and places bearing northern names. Even in this age of canned talkie music, the skirl of the pipes enchants children and irritates grown-ups in the Dunedin streets.

True enough, in these days the Headmaster in school has become merely the Headmaster and is no longer the Dominie or even the "Heedmaister," and in the home a cloth is a cloth and no longer a "clout," and there are no shawls of tartan plaid, and a person is in another room when wanted and not "ben the house." An old rhyme is still sung, but with an ironical note in the voice.

*"Where are you going on New Year's Day?  
Oot to the Cale. (Caledonian Grounds),  
To hear John Hogg and hear his pipers play,  
Oot at the Cale."*

The Scot survives in more than all this. Otago is the home of New Zealand's most popular cereal, and it eats as well as grows large quantities of the oat, while patent versions are packed by Flemming. Dunedin breakfasts know more of porridge than of prunes and figs, and not long ago I heard the morning porridge rightly designated the plural "they." Butchers sell huge piles of those horseshoe-shaped puddings made of very little meat and very much oatmeal. I used to visit a great aunt who had never eaten bread in her own "hame" for thirty

years but always her 'ain girdle scones ' Oat cakes are featured in bakers' windows, and a few years ago prominent bakers were called Wright & Aldred and Hopkins, and so on. There are more steepled Kirks than ever, and in these days, of course, more vacant pews, but the word of God is still drawied with a northern accent, and pulpit admonitions still reverberate with rolled r's.

Dunedin's politicians afford no escape from the rule. Downie Stewart, Tavener, Munro, Ansell, sat in the last Parliament, and Downie Stewart and Munro and Ansell in this. The defeated candidates had among themselves a Gilchrist and a Campbell. When Dunedin had a poet his name was Thomas Bracken. When Dunedin wanted a public library the cautious citizens went, plate in hand, to the late Andrew Carnegie Library Trust. The evidence of successful mendicancy stands in Moray Place. The Burns Club meets regularly. With the passage of time "Burns nights" have become a means of paying tribute to a national fluid rather than a means of keeping alive the memory of the "Immortal Bard, but Dewar and Johnnie Walker and White Horse Mackay and D C L and Gaelic and Ussher and McCullum and Low Robertson and Bell and Highland Nectar are also national heroes. And the people who distil the fluid are alive and well represented commercially, whereas the Bard who distilled radical sentiment is for many only an excuse to drink what is very often good.

In this City of the South I was born, dark-eyed, lean, restless, hungry as an unfledged bird, imaginative, combination of Celt and Mediterranean, or perhaps Celt and Mediterranean alternately, bearing the Northern name of Albany and the Southern name of Porcello. Although I say much about the city, I can say little about my parentage. I have gathered hearsay evidence listening at the fireside to my uncles and aunts when I was not supposed to be listening, but I never have asked nor shall I ever ask my mother about my father. His relationship to the family is, I sense, enshrouded in painful diffidence. He was what he was and I am not concerned to assert the respectability of my antecedents anyway. Their respectability would afford me less excuse for my own lack of it. I know that I am, rather than why or how I became, what I am.



All that I do know is that my birth meant more hunger and hardship for someone. Insufficient food had to go a little farther. For the first thing I remember is not an event but a quality, an awareness of poverty, the everlasting clamour for bread. And from the cradle I seem to have revolted against this state of things without knowing against whom to revolt. I was a rebel from the dawn of consciousness. I must have been born protesting. Maybe I was under-nourished in the womb itself. I was instinctively what most people thought I was when they rolled my name on their lips.

"Porcello." I can hear the word, "Porcello."

My eyes fall beneath the searching curiosity of others noting the difference in my face as well as in my name.

"Where did you get your dark skin?"

"I don't know. My father, I suppose."

"Who was your father?"

At that I used to go on my way. The time had arrived to leave. For I had often asked myself that question. Who was my father? I was born in Dunedin. That is enough. Heaven knows who my father was.

## **We were poor**

ALTHOUGH I have been describing the prosperity of Dunedin, there were no favourable portents in the sky and very few in the cupboard when I was born. Indeed, I have been led to believe that the cupboard, usually but meagrely furnished, was on this occasion unusually bare. I was another brat arriving to compete for insufficient food, and that was all there was to it, except that my mother was perverse enough to love the brats she could scarcely feed. "Porcello? Who was your father?" That question rings in my ears. But as I grew to an awareness of Dunedin and our own miserable position, I lost all inclinations to probe. I was curious, but I had not the capacity for the deliberate infliction of pain. My mother's wedding certificate I never sought, and if I had chanced to discover that I were a love child or even passion's accident, that would not have worried me. Indeed, it would have induced a romantic

quality of doubt. The world, instead of the gutter, would have become my parent. Convention is so much a mere "Thou Shalt Not" to the poor, that brats like myself are out of harmony with convention from the dawn of understanding.

In later years I had no desire to probe old wounds so I never questioned my mother. And if I cannot prove illustrious descent why should I be at pains to prove what society calls the more shameful. Such blemishes only add to distinction when they relate to the existence of princes. I have never consulted the register, and I am never likely to be of such importance as to provoke anyone else to turn the leaves, so that whether I was the offspring of legal matrimony or the child of passion or of sheer poverty's accommodations is a reserved point. Whether with or against the law, it were folly when the cupboard was so bare. But if Old Mother Hubbard had had no dog, there would have been no nursery rhyme. My origin then, like life itself, is a question mark. My mother came from Scotland.

My maternal grandmother was born of poor parents in the city of Edinburgh, and my maternal grandfather was born in Glasgow. My grandfather had served in the Imperial Army. We had photos and discharges as well as assertion for proof. According to him, he served for the sake of pure, undefiled patriotism, for King and God and Country; according to my grandmother, he took the King's shilling through an abject poverty which compelled either such an acceptance or no shilling at all. Alice McDonald was probably right, for she married my grandfather while he was in the army and slaved at the wash-tub to help accumulate the price of his discharge.

Mother was born in Glasgow and was an infant when the family transplanted itself to New Zealand. The only remembered incident of the voyage was that a rat with hungry teeth bit her in the leg. The years of poverty failed to eradicate the memory of those teeth. "Travel the world and broaden your outlook," says the advertisement. Mother travelled the world and got her leg bitten. I have accepted as truth a statement that my father was born in Naples, that he was an Italian. That second addition is necessary. To be born in Brazil where the nuts come from doesn't necessarily mean that one is a nut

or a Brazilian I have never seen his photo and have wondered if the police have his finger-prints But I am thin, dark, and neither physically nor mentally a raw boned Scot, and in consequence have found the Italian from Naples legend easy to believe Although there is a romantic legend that makes him a travelling showman, I have often visioned this parent of mine as a thin, dark, none too clean organ grinder, or hawker of those plaster monuments that were once so popular Maybe when down on his uppers he even hawked catch penny wares to back doors (bootlaces, pins, hooks and eyes, gay coloured silk handkerchiefs, pieces of camphor, hairpins, ornamented combs, all carried in an emporium very much like a butcher's basket covered with shiny oilcloth), for there was another not too well supported idea that he was a Neapolitan gipsy This thought in my youth was not unpleasant The basket of the old fashioned hawker was a glamorous emporium to a poor child Evidently he was a ne'er-do well rather than a domesticated parent—one of those human shining cuckoos who play at love and leave hedge sparrows to mourn the consequences Probably he was artistic and tired, moderately artistic and superlatively tired He had no talent for earning wages in routine industry and kept moving and, according to hearsay even then, lingered longer than his welcome His sex life was obviously as itinerant as his economic one Perhaps this is all merely a legend created to surround reality with a cloud, something verbally acceptable which veils the more sordid If I knew the truth, I could not toy with magical or criminal possibilities I do not know whether he was ejected forcibly from our home because of his uselessness, or whether he showed us all a clean pair of heels Does it matter?

All this hearsay information came to me piecemeal If the Neapolitan gipsy existed he may still be alive, prosperous or a pauper, I don't care which For many years this uncertainty stimulated romantic speculation; the truth may have been unaccountably sordid He may be some superfluous, lingering, bleary eyed, dead beat, or a mute, inglorious, grey-haired, ear-ringed admirer of macaroni and Mussolini What does it matter, except as it pleases our fancy? More than the Porcello stream has flowed through muddied channels. The most

authoritative account is that he was one of a family of showmen, perambulating entertainers who played fiddles and banjos and concertinas, hung by their toes and teeth from trapezes, turned double and single somersaults, tied themselves in contorted reef and granny knots, and stood on one another's shoulders in those human pyramids once so popular in the entertainment of stage struck rustics. This was the story I liked.

"My father walked a tight-rope "

"My father could do a double somersault "

Once I even asserted, "My father was a lion tamer. He got killed putting his head in a lion's mouth "

I had read a story of such a happening. The swarthy, dark-haired, ear ringed, gipsy would have been a colourful morsel for any lion's palate. I assisted this legend, because every boy in those parts wanted to hang by the heels and teeth and walk tight ropes, but there must have been validity behind the story, for Mother once assured me that she fell out with my father because she was "too stiff in the hips to be an acrobat "

Since I have the soul of a vagabond allied with perseverance—the Italian acrobatic father and the northern stiff-hipped mother are feasible explanations. Neither blended, but each evidently made a contribution. With the irresponsibility of my legendary father and my mother's stick-to-itiveness, I can understand why I can, with laborious industry, fashion an edifice and then, with a well directed, cynical kick, set the whole show toppling. If my father were real, and if my mother had not been stiff in the hips, I might have seen much of the world hanging head downward from a trapeze. I might to-day have been cursing the advent of the talkies. As it was, I became merely a vagabond whose name was never starred on the billheads.

There is no legend about my mother having been born in Scotland. As I have said, she came to New Zealand in a windjammer and a rat bit her in the leg. The trip lasted five months, but the rat bit her only once. After the family landed at the port of Oamaru, they lived in the immigration barracks, which, in those days housed nearly all new arrivals. Possessed of an army discharge with good conduct, and of

an emphatic Presbyterian enthusiasm, Sandy Stuart easily found work. He was a baker, and the trade must have proved remunerative, for three were added to his family. None of these children has left any mark on New Zealand history, but of them more anon. They have been "God-fearing," respected and patriotic, and accustomed to frown on my progress, for with each successive calamity, they murmured, "I told you so." They were once good to me when I was an infant and if misjudged by the Gods they worshipped, they are failures, I am sorry for them.

I was born in Athol Place, between Hanover and St Andrew Streets, on Hallowe'en. My memories of the few years we lived in that place are faint. The house consisted of two rooms with a detached lavatory. There was a side approach to the backyard, where memory records a first inglorious recollection. I see myself in a procession of tiny tots, miniature guttersnipes, toddling along the lane and piddling from side to side in imitation of a street-watering cart. To the pure all things are pure. We were as innocent of evil as a set of fountain cupids. The house still exists, but I never linger when I pass. Memory of the poverty in this house chills my spine. Every brick tells of hunger and grinding poverty.

Few other memories of Athol Place remain. Large numbers of children—grubby children—used to come from a long, two-storied, wooden tenement opposite to play in the gutters and around the kerb. I suppose I was of the most grubby. Neither my mother nor my sister made any impression that lingers in my mind from that time, yet a vivid recollection of these pinafore days exists despite the obliterating years. Every morning there came a parade of prisoners from the city jail, marching to labour on a piece of Government land at the north end of the City.

The prison was in the heart of the City. I can shut my eyes and see that shuffling parade of men in broad-shouldered moleskins. I can hear the clinking of picks and shovels in the tool handcarts that were drawn by two harnessed humans. I can recall the faces of marching convicts, some shamed by the bold curiosity of sidewalk loiterers, some, the tough old

lags, hard and defiant. The warders with rifles were grim in their dark uniforms alongside the snow white moleskins. Maybe it was only the sombre uniform that made the warders seem severe. The parade was so impressive that even to-day those jailbirds march across my consciousness and down Athol Place as though I were witnessing the scene. Perhaps the unusual silence of the parade—for there was no sound except the creaking tool handcart, shuffling feet and clanking tools, with perhaps an occasional whisper of recognition from curious onlookers, for Athol Place probably recruited its quota of that army—gave to the parade a grim quality intimidating even to our baby minds. Who knows but that I may have seen my progenitor shuffle by in branded moleskin.

Every morning for weeks that parade came into the Place, and my ears still seem to hear the clank clank, chunk-chunk of the picks and shovels, the handcart wheels rattling against macadam, and the shuffle-shuffle of feet. And my eyes still see grim warders with batons and rifles, the averted faces of the shamed, the unashamed stare of the calloused, the gazing kerbside idlers. Athol Place pitied the moleskin-clad figures; I pitied them. Perhaps the outcast in me instinctively sensed a kinship.

In Athol Place our prison house was our poverty. How I came to understand that our poverty separated us even from the poor I don't know, but I sensed it very early. In such a New World Slum, our neighbours were rich by comparison. I knew we were poor more than a decade before I asked myself why we were poor. We were fed largely on left-overs. Pie dishes containing the remnants of some sweet, bones with some meat still adhering, were given to my mother, who brought them home in paper parcels or wrapped in a shawl. Stale scones, cold, mashed potatoes, odd jugs of soup all came to our bellies from the tables of the privileged. Appreciation of our dependence on charity came to us in the cradle, and an intellectual revolt against acceptance of such poverty required decades before it matured. So bare of excitements was our pitiful frugal life that all my memories incline to the sordid, or else revolve around food.

I mention a grubby tragedy only because I met its chief

actor years after in a crowded French *estaminet* where, before he went to his doom in Flanders mud, we uproariously recalled the event. Willie had mentioned that shells were better than pills as an aid to personal hygiene. I brought the incident to mind: Willie Gee sat in the gutter in Athol Place disconsolate because he had soiled his breeks and because his mother had a heavy hand. The warm *estaminet* and the Anzac shandy seemed to confer on that grubby memory a romantic tinge. Such would be the absurdity one would recall in the last moments of consciousness. Willie's mother recalls another tragedy. Once, by some wonderful bounty, I received a yellow-fleshed apple full of sugary juice. Proud to ostentation, I crossed the road to the slum tenement where Willie lived, to eat my apple in front of an audience. Psyche as well as gullet demanded a thrill.

"Where did you get it?" stout Mrs. Gee pounced.

I answered.

"You mustn't be greedy," she went on.

She grabbed my apple and cut it in four, giving her son and her wastrel husband a piece and retaining a piece herself. The quarter she returned was the one at which I had nibbled.

"I believe in teaching children not to be selfish."

For some reason that lesson failed. I have never forgiven the brutal raid and dispossession. If I ever got a second apple, I am sure that I consumed its every fragment in our own backyard.

Thus there are no silver spoons, nor purple patches in my early memories. Water-carts in an alley, processions of criminals, a tearful infant with uncomfortable breeks, the ruthless filching of my apple, the gathering around the parcel of scraps brought home by my mother. No recollection of the mother as clear as that of mutton bones, odd potatoes in the parcel. No memory of father or brother or sister, but the acute awareness of poverty, of neighbourly pity, a knowledge that even in the slum we were as unrespectable and outcast as the morning moleskin parade.

Nor is the next memory more appeasing. A jump of a few months or years and we are away from Athol Place. Perhaps we could not pay the rent, and I see myself standing

out in front of another house in another street, hand in hand with my sister, desirous that the passing world see the new garment I am wearing, a cast off from some wealthier child's back The house we lived in was down a lane We generally lived in obscure, worm eaten hovels down lanes, in houses that, like their inhabitants, hesitated to parade their misery to the open road Except in the country, we never knew what it was to face the open road In my new cast-off pinafore I had the pride that goes before disaster I stepped back down the lane, fell into a tub of hot water, got burned, spent the rest of the day in bed, more fretful at my inability to expose myself in the second hand piece of clothing than pained at the burning

All of which indicates that although Dunedin was one of the most prosperous and God fearing cities in the new and rich country of New Zealand, there was poverty in the land and that we were poor even amid poverty There were three of us children Rose, a sister, who was a few years older, and a younger brother, Douglas Where the income came from at this time, I did not know There could have been but little money, for we were deprived of bare necessities Grandfather and grandmother and uncles and aunts were at a country village called Riversdale, where the old man had secured a job as a baker, and our mother was fending alone Need you wonder I never probed the past when the chance came? Sufficient that my mother was of the stuff that endures, for she managed to keep us alive without invoking the guardianship of the law, even though her income was meagre and earned cruelly We loved one another, and were welded together by the common bond of our unsatisfied hunger But with us children it was merely the hunger of the stomach With our mother there was probably the additional hunger for life Her task was grimmer than that of the men in moleskin who had shuffled by the Athol Place She got as little from life as they She staked her all on her children and by the very circumstances of their life they were doomed from birth Despite her fight for us, we brought her increasing sorrow until she must have cursed the fact of our existence



Yes. We were poor. I believe that I was even proud, although mother had all that nonsense trampled out of her. For very early, I knew the pride that goes with a poorly lined stomach and I learned to dissemble my feelings when hungry witness to other children sitting in the gutter biting semi-circles out of pieces of cake or slices of bread well buttered and crowned lavishly with jam. Children love to triumph and gloat over the less fortunate. They eat cake like public performers. I learned not only to dissemble but to lie.

"I don't care for cake."

"I don't like jam and butter together on bread."

So were we outcasts in the city of steeped kirks. Richard John Seddon, New Zealand's Premier, called New Zealand "God's Own Country" and told of the plenty there could be for all. But we were always poor.

## PART TWO

### Riversdale

SOME forgotten event broke up our Dunedin home, and our little family was scattered to the winds. Either an unusually severe attack of poverty starved us out, or an unsympathetic and unpaid landlord thrust us out into the gutter. The task of feeding, clothing and sheltering her brats had become too much, and mother retired defeated to a single room in the city accompanied by my sister Rose, while Douglas and myself were hustled off to live with our grandparents at Riversdale.

Riversdale, as dull as any very small country village, was never so to the small boy from the city, except when horizons were obscured by the drunkenness of grandmother. The village sits in the midst of a plain devoted to wheat- and oat-growing, a plain that gives way to rolling hills which, in their turn, at least to the westward, are backed by snow-peaked mountains. In these days of swift transport and circulating libraries and radio, even young Riversdale reasonably lively. My first remembrance of the village is to the full the sordid dullness of country village those days. I was taken by my uncle to Bob Jopp's one Sunday morning and was placed along the stable and oat- amid a group of young men. The sun was shining, a church bell was ringing and all the horses were crunching and blowing the chaff away from the heavier oats in the way horses have. The young men engaged in an enthralling pastime. Each of them put a halfpenny into the common pool and then selected a horse. They were betting on which horse would dung first. Every time a tail was raised the winner

collected the pool and a new one was raised. Watching, I longed for the great day when I should be grown up and have the pennies to play a man's part in a marvellous game. Returning with my uncle, he cautioned against telling on him.

Riversdale was, and still is, a one-street village with shops on one side of the street and the railway station on the other. The social events of the day were the daily arrival of the railway train with its delivery of mail, the synchronized departure of the mail coach to Waikaia with a pounding of iron tyres on gravel and the plop! plop! plop! of iron-shod horses. Riversdale had two hotels, places I grew to hate. At them, farmers foregathered to idle and transact business. Those were the days of very late hotel-closing, days in which a publican never willingly parted from a client until the client had been parted from his cash. Rabbiters, harvesters, shearers, ploughmen, roustabouts, leaving their jobs, carrying their swags, and with eyes turned towards homes in Dunedin, were frequently headed off by the hotels. Mine host was always "Good Fellow," through alcoholic spectacles, for the drinker only haggles about the price and quality with the butcher and baker, the quantity of food making the consumer of food more fastidious and the consumer of alcohol less. Mine host always greased the slope to intoxication with abounding good-fellowship. He had a warm, plump hand, and a jovial, almost affectionate greeting. And he was even benign in his remonstrances when the victim was whizzing downward with irresistible velocity.

"Must you have another? Go and have a rest for a while. You'll miss your train."

Bless his noble, benign heart, his benevolence was not merely verbal. When the victim was penniless, headsore and physically unfit for the toil to which again he must bend his back, when the victim wanted to pawn his swag to retain the sensation of falling and not the concussion of sobriety, mine host was nature's gentleman. Forgive him his ostentatious flourishes.

"Buy your swag. Of course I can't buy your swag. Couldn't think of it."

"I must have a drink."

"Here, have one on the house. It will steady your head."

"Thanks," trembling hand clutching the glass.

"Get into the dining-room and have a meal. I warned you not to go so hard but you wouldn't listen."

"By God, you're a good fellow."

"Here's half a crown provided you don't spend it in the bar."

That final piece of ostentation always effectually wrote finis to the publican's generosity, for if the fellow sneaked into the opposition hotel to spend the half-crown, as he generally did, how could he come begging again. He had betrayed the publican's generosity and felt himself to be a mean fellow. So back the penniless one must needs go to work, back to tell the world of the good fellowship of mine host.

"He's a great fellow in that pub "

"Is he?"

"One of the very best."

Riversdale had two pubs and one butcher's shop, a grocer's shop and a bakery where my grandfather, Sandy Stuart, worked. There were also two of those old-fashioned forges, now mostly replaced by motor mechanic's workshops, and an emporium or two of catch-penny consequence. Village store-keepers generally managed to retain their trade by keeping their customers reasonably indebted. If Riversdale had two pubs, that did not mean a godless village, for it boasted a Presbyterian kirk, a church of England, a Catholic church, and, since it was a high-water moment of the flood tide of Salvation Army Evangelism, a branch of that organization had found precarious financial footing. On Saturday nights, the red-jerseyed blood-and-fire enthusiasts gathered in front of the pubs to sing.

*"Pull down the devil's kingdom,  
Pull it down. Pull it down.  
Where'er he holds dominion,  
Pull him down.  
Pull down the devil's kingdom,*

*Where'er he holds dominion  
Pull down the devil's kingdom,  
Pull it down"*

Following the song and services, they cadged pennies from the drunks in the bar

The Riversdale plain is flat and rises gradually to rolling hills I see those hills in memory as misty, hazy, unapproachable to my short legs and yet alluring to my mind, for when I was introduced to the world of sprites and gnomes and fairies, those beings seemed to me to inhabit the tall tussocks on top of the rolling hills Beyond the hills, looking inland, towers the Remarkable Range, snow capped in summer, snow-clad in winter, rising sheer from the cold lake Wakatipu For in New Zealand we designate lakes hot or cold Our thermal regions give us the hot lakes in the north as a set off to the cold lakes of Alpine temperatures The plain is fertile and easily worked and used to be rotated from grass pasture to turnips and rape, thence to wheat and oats, and back to grass pasture Mechanical transport has played havoc with the growth of oats much of which was chaffed and sent around the southern end of New Zealand to Melbourne to feed the huge Clydesdales that once champed their way through Australian city thoroughfares In those days the rolling hill tops were still native grass and virgin plume tussock good natural pasturage long since ploughed under and replaced with imported grasses The native pastures nourished as many rabbits as sheep, and a rabbit trapping industry gave regular and considerable winter employment Sheep and cattle—it was before the great rise of dairying—wheat and oats, at times a hundred bushels of oats to the acre, made the district prosperous Futures were not so heavily mortgaged as they are to day Wants were fewer, and to a greater extent were met from the soil itself The transport was bred and grazed on the farm and was no consumer of foreign oil, nor was it bought on the instalment plan The buggy was a staunch affair cheaper by far than a modern combination gramophone radio There was no rural telephone on the wall and the cinema had not supplanted the magic lantern with its calico

bed-sheet draped against the kitchen wall. The big daily event cost no more than time and, mayhap, a wetting, said event being the arrival of the train with the evening mail.

The house inhabited by Sandy Stuart had never been planned; it had merely grown up. Originally a one-roomed farmer's hut, the other rooms had been added one at a time as the farmer had added a wife and then family. The four-roomed house possessed only one door, and outside it I see my brother in the sunlight for the first remembered time. Though we shared a common poverty, we were opposite in appearance and temperament. My hair was straight and jet; his was curly and golden. I was abnormally lean and he was chubby. I was shy and sensitive and he was full of confidence. I hid from strangers while he paraded and exposed himself for their adulation. I was pale and swarthy, he was rosy-cheeked and fresh. I was the odd man out while he managed to hold the centre of the stage. He was everything a baby boy should be—a sparkling, vivacious child.

My grandfather was an honest Presbyterian, patriotic in the verbally emphatic King-and-Country sense, and especially so when some illustrated paper reproduced a picture of a tartan-clad Queen Victoria visiting one of her Northern Palaces. Like most Otago Scots, he was proud to be a Britisher because he believed the Scot was the cream of the British peoples. He might have become an important New Zealander if he, too, had not been cursed with a rambling spirit, and if my grandmother had not been accursed with the liquor habit. For a while Sandy had prospered. On his arrival in Otago he had set himself up as a baker at Oamaru and had been on the way to accumulating a moderate means. Children had come—my mother was the only one born in Scotland—and he had been able to pay high rent for a front pew. Alas for the fatal weakness of his wife!

"Puir old Alice MacDonald, God bless her erring soul," if one may use that phrase for its sentimental richness rather than to assert one's faith. Dear old Alice MacDonald, her craving made away with the cash, the furniture, the home, her children's future, and it whetted her husband's roving spirit, easily destroying his ambition. Periodically she had bouts of

sottish drunkenness Her habit reduced the home to penury, her children to despair, caused her husband to become a wanderer drifting from job to job, always forgiving and pitching a tent anew with the promise of his wife's reformation, a promise and a penitence inevitably followed by a fresh outbreak Every effort to build a home was doomed in advance by the stuff the good fellows sell If my mother never became a prosperous well rooted citizen, perhaps, like myself, she had some slight environmental apology

Being a wanderer temperamentally, Sandy required careful handling to keep him rooted, but he curbed his passion occasionally and attempted to found a home When, at last, he gave up all effort to settle, he wandered up and down New Zealand, baking and cooking, and up and down the seas around New Zealand, baking and cooking for the crews of windjammers, buffeted and pitched from job to job as much as from sea to sea as the increasing inefficiency of old age made skippers less inclined to suffer his temper But he loved Alice MacDonald, worshipped God, and honoured Queen Victoria when she wore the tartan Like many people of faults, Alice MacDonald was easy to love, while her less faulty husband was more difficult The grace of a rich personality inhabits many a failure I love her memory still, though she is dead these many years, after spending a decade as a pauper brooding over the wreckage of her life

Sandy had many faults While a good Kirk man, he possessed the very devil of a temper, a temper short of only one ingredient of the best pickle, the vinegar, for Sandy's fury was all heat and no acid Pepper, cayenne pepper, chilies, cloves, mustard, spice, curry, ginger, everything that burned was there There was a fashionable way of accounting for such tempers in those days, and Sandy's temper was believed to have been acquired accordingly He was supposed to have derived it from his military service in India where, under the hot sun, he had been fed on all the aforementioned condiments As a coal-fed furnace belches flames and smoke of coal, so was Sandy's passion believed to be an eruption of all the hot things he had ingested But Sandy never shirked his job even if he did emit spicy breezes as he busied himself.

And when Alice MacDonald was drunk, there was occas on for the eruptions, although, intimidated momentarily by his fury more than by grandmother's drunkenness, we blamed him for his anger and saved our sympathy for grandmother Blind sentiment! Sober Alice MacDonald was so gracious a "puir body" that that made us blind She was loving, tender and generous She would take food from her "ain mouth" to feed a hungry soul, and the cloak from her own back to keep some strange "puir body" warm And the day after she would steal the blanket from the child's bed to exchange it for liquor And Alice was God fearing, too She was for ever doomed to sin with an uneasy, accusing conscience She went on Sunday with Sandy to occupy the pew, and went because she sincerely believed Between bouts she kept the house clean and she kept all around her happy with her mellow humanity She used to sing to me the songs of her Edinburgh girlhood For weeks at a time the warmth of her presence delighted, and then, when all was serene and the past bouts forgotten and forgiven, the craving would obtrude itself Overnight the dear old lady would become the sottish old hag, the house would grow dirty, the food would not be bought nor the meals cooked Everyone would sneak around in silent shame, my brother and I would creep into silent corners and hope to escape notice We hated to be called to grandmother in her sottish state Her caresses were unlovely, vile things, and she would seem hateful We would have the house to ourselves while our uncles and grandfather were away at work and a drunken grandmother meant a disorganized and lonely world Lonely until she called, and then the world was hideously over populated We could not go far away, for if we did not rapidly respond when the old lady called she expressed a venomous irritation foreign to her when sober

"Albany," the thick voice would cry

There might be no answer I would be afraid

"Albany"—the voice would acquire a hard note

Maybe I would answer I would become afraid not to

"Get me a glass of water, and don't go away"

She would try to gather me in her arms and I would try



to avoid the hateful touch, would pray that she would not sense my aversion

"Come here"

I would have to go

Her breath would be vile, her voice hard and cruel, her eye dazed, her hair unkempt Small wonder I acquired an early loathing for liquor which kept me an abstainer for many long years We would stay around in the hateful presence within earshot, and outside the sun would be shining and the birds singing, and the sky would be specklessly blue, but that unkempt figure in the bed clouded the world for us 'Puir body' That phrase, expressed as Alice MacDonald herself might have uttered it, is the one I would use to her memory When she expressed herself and not the liquor she was very kind to me As with my mother, I was her favourite, and when later my feet kept blundering into trouble she had no harsh word for me but only sympathy and encouragement For she had that transcendent understanding of frailty that is born of a common weakness Stronger and less lovable people have condemned her for her culpable sin condemned her as they exalted free will

I had two uncles and an aunt One uncle left school to be a blacksmith, the other to be a painter Their wages were required to eke out the family budget My aunt was absent from home most of the time

Riversdale was spacious after the congested streets and limited backyards of the city and more spacious in the quantitative sense as well The rural world had variety Children enjoy a simple life, the bewildering variety of human character that lends quantitative spaciousness to a city thoroughfare is beyond their perspective Our poverty had hedged us into our own slum and the gutter in front of our lane The paling walls had been so high they had blotted out the sky In Riversdale the sky was higher and more blue because in Dunedin I had never lain on my back in warm grass, indeed, it may be that I discovered the sky for the first time in Riversdale as I lay on my back under the blue wondering what made fragments of white cloud drift from the horizon to horizon, from whence they came, to where they were bound Children

in narrow backyards see only rusty nails in fences It was in Riversdale that I awakened to a consciousness of majestic sunsets of red and grey and black and blue and golden and orange, of the quivering music of insects from hedge shade in the heat of midday, of the warm resinous odour of pine needles and macrocarpa, of the stars and moon that came at twilight, of the stars that glittered at the bidding of feathered songsters that throbbed an evening chorus from the peak of pine steeples

Alice MacDonald aided my awakening of consciousness, for she possessed an acute awareness of the value of all such things and had the power to observe that awareness in children's eyes And she could endow the evening enchantments with mystical interpretation We always sat outside the door or lounged in the grass on warm evenings as day gave way to twilight and as twilight gave way to night And Alice MacDonald told us beautiful old fashioned stories "There was a pair body" . How many of her stories were of a "pair body"!

The world was wide and full of thrills in the daytime Our section was at the elbow of the road, and a gorse hedge was the roadside boundary On the other two sides of the square, tall pines walled us away from the farmlands In the section were three willows by a pond There were two gates, a high five barred easily swinging one and a four barred one Both were easy for boyish legs to straddle Beyond, in the surrounding fields were wheat and oats or turnip and grass, fields of green or fields of gold waving crop that towered up level with my head A few hundred yards away was a fresh creek with watercress Riversdale had length breadth, depth, and quantity, and its spaciousness was not walled by deprivation Riversdale was respite from all that had hovered over our Dunedin home A thousand times I have heard my grand mother say, 'Heaven knows how she managed to feed her bairns' "She," of course, was my mother

Wheatfield and oatfield beyond the tall pines Virgin waving tussock out on the roadside Tall pines piercing miraculous sunsets so that birds sang down from heavenly platforms Heavily golden and perfumed gorse hedges swarming with

bees and insects. Broom hedges that exploded seed pods in the hot afternoon sun. Three willows by a pond. A water-crossed creek deep enough imaginatively to contain the mighty vastness of a deep sea. Across the road an unfenced railway that ran from Riversdale to the Cold Lakes with deep pits on each side of the line. Beyond the railway line, miles of fields walled in by tall plantations in the shades of which grew city-like clusters of fat, ugly toadstools. After paling fences and gutters, this was fairyland itself. Rabbits were there too, millions of rabbits, called vermin in Riversdale. They ate the grass which should have been pasturing sheep, and burrowed beneath the soft plain. They were trapped, frozen, exported to Britain in winter, shot, ferreted, poisoned, gassed (New Zealand was the first country to introduce murder by gas attack), destroyed by any possible method in summer. Rabbits could eat acres of grass, and could reduce the sheep and cattle pasturing capacity of farmlands and bankrupt the farmer, so a ceaseless war was maintained. There were tens of thousands of sheep on the farmlands around, clever collie dogs with almost human intelligence, and there were hacks, cows, bullocks—a host of everything.

There was a slaughterhouse a quarter of a mile up the road, and a thunder of hoof, yelling of stockmen, a cracking of whips, a barking of dogs, a snorting or a lowing of cattle, would herald a herd being driven along the road to death. I was soon mimicking the incidents of the yarding. From the top of the five-barred gate, where safety was allied with thrilling proximity, I could watch the lowered horns of the charging beasts as vigorous cattlemen turned them back again with the blinding, cracking, wounding fury of whips. Here was sensation!

I went back that way a few years ago to recapture the thrill. One should never go back. The four-roomed house was a decrepit shanty. The huge section was a miserable corner of ground. The pond was a filthy puddle. The pines did not pierce the sky, did not even impede passing clouds. The neighbourhood seemed incredibly weary, void of romance. What had been heaven to the child was so fearfully dull that my mind could not recapture any thrills.

"Wait a moment," I said to the driver as I alighted, "I want to see where I used to live."

No birds sang magical notes from tall steeples. I was soon back on the car.

"Shall I stop for a little while?" the driver asked.

"No," I said, "drive. Drive like hell. Step on it."

I wanted to escape with my memories intact, escape before I yawned. I wanted to get near the place I had once known, and I could do that only by running away. Do we run away when we verbally recapitulate. Make the sordid romantic?

## Song at twilight

MEMORY never flows in a clear stream. There are huge blanks with vivid patches here and there, as though one's mind were a camera which registered some impressions with brilliant-sunlight clarity while being permanently closed to others. Sometimes it is a quality in the happening that is recalled, and ocular details are blurred in the glow of such a quality. Some memories seem to have registered the pulsation of each heart beat, and yet that moment may be the only one remembered in long months. The milestones are remembered because of their unusual detail, the miles because of the monotonous quality of the detail. And one cannot be sure that the milestones are registered chronologically. Confused jumbles of happenings and half memories, shadowy recollections, surround instants, sometimes hours, of brilliant mental recording.

How well do I remember the mellow air of magic sunsets and warm twilights. In no place on earth that I know does sunrise come and sunset go with such a melody of tone. Of course, my feeling may merely be the recollections of a virgin sensibility now grown blasé. The statement is truth to me. City adults rarely see sunrise. They burn midnight oil and leave their beds in the morning to find the sun shining in the window. If they do arise before the sun they live in the shadows of buildings and fences and see few of the early beams that strike at rural windows.

In the country all life rises to greet the sun And children—tiny children put early to bed—are often awake at that mystery hour when trembling leaf and flower are getting ready to cast off the nightgown of dew It is that hour at which birds chatter in a kind of scale practice before sunlight evokes their swelling song, that hour at which the beasts of the field rise and stretch themselves as if afraid sunrise might catch them in bed, and the rabbits are scurrying home It is the mystery hour during which children once believed that sprites and fairies, who had stayed out late, hurried their steps so as not to be transfixed and withered with a beam of sunlight It is the time when the late snail and lazy worm hasten to dodge the early bird It is the hour of childish wonder

In the city, the child hears the rattle of a milk van, the thud of the morning paper In the country, boys and girls hear everything stretching and stirring as they stretch and stir themselves The sun used to come and strike through my window, turning the gaunt shadows outside into green trees I often stood with my face at the pane and worshipped at the birth of day

"Get back to bed You'll catch your death of cold The barn's always at the window at daybreak"

The mystery hour was believed to have attractions for me because I was born on Hallowe'en, the night of queer comings and goings in fairyland

I remember sunsets even more clearly because they were shared The glow of human love was added to the beauty of departing day Childish mouths opened like the wide open beaks of hungry birds in awe at the glory and ache of parting day Childish hearts throbbed with that exquisite melancholy that is ecstatic pleasure If we could but have the delicate membranes of childhood always to catch the virginal impact of earth and sky melodies, would we require musical machines to excite our palates? Adult age requires cleverness, and sneers at the natural harmony that enthralled open-mouthed, pagan children Adults have music compounded like jam, so much of this and so much of that ingredient and the careful observance of rules. All is categorical and analysed until a

sound is only music if it accords with convention Even God is an involved complexity Children worship the pagan gods of colour, of sun and moonlight of flower and leaf Every night we worshipped open mouthed as though to ingest the twilight harmony. My brother would rock on a home made but satisfactory horse and with his eyes turned fanatically to the tree tops, would croon again and again and again

*'Up in the balloon boys  
Up in the balloon*

His soul would careen through space as though he rode a moonbeam rather than a home made rocker I envied Douglas his rocking horse for, although two years older, I was not so grown up as I was supposed to be But I never challenged his possession because of his temper and of the "Thou Shalt Nots' of adults

Colour, except that rich green blue of evening, would fade, and the tall pines would stand out as dusky black shapes which gradually merged into that darkening sky Insects would quiver a nocturne, and from the tallest trees a sky melody would pour down silently Birds sing differently in the country The most glorious songster fails in a city park with city noises for accompaniment I am sure the melody flowed down from the topmost branches, those that tipped the sky, a heavenly chorus from a host of well fed and feathered wheat eaters telling of the happiness of days spent loving and loafing and gorging That song from above used to make my frail chest vibrate I think I opened my mouth to allow the golden waves to flow inward against all my membranes I am sure I used to vibrate in unison with it That was one of the secrets one never divulged for fear of adult laughter. But Alice MacDonald knew, for her breast vibrated, too She knew that the two of us found a common ecstasy in twilight magic and melody Uncle Donald frequently laughed when he came upon us sitting spellbound

"Listen," he would say, 'they have stolen too much wheat They are crying with stomach ache "

He was at that age at which birds and rabbits were only good as shotgun targets

Alice MacDonald would sit with us outside the door listening to those birds during the mellow evenings. She loved the songs of the northern birds because their music induced a sweet homesickness. She was certain that imported birds were homesick for northern spheres. There was a trilling thrush that used to dim her eyes. Was there a vagabond streak in nearly all of us that made us as wayward as the birds we listened to?

Grandmother—Big Mother we always called her—was adept at interpreting bird songs to small boys. I could feel, and she could explain why I did feel, in understandable words and accents, a language one cannot reproduce, compounded as it was as much of sighs and of murmurs as of words. She was positive that all the birds sang for small boys, although now I know they sang for Alice MacDonald too. I can sense again that the pine-top melody, blended with the sunset and the twilight colours, had a power to make Alice MacDonald again a small girl. Many an adult rides a sky beam back to childhood's days. Big Mother had been able to think, mayhap, of happy days that were clean of the clouds of alcohol.

*"Just a song at twilight,  
When the lights are low,  
And the flickering shadows  
Softly come and go."*

Marvellous baby age, when to be sentimental is not to be thought a fool. Her voice would softly croon the song and we would also croon and blend our voices with the twilight chorus. Alice MacDonald would stroke my head and dream of her "Bonnie Scotland" and sing of it, too, at times.

*"Far awa to Bonnie Scotland  
Has my spirit taen its flight."*

Sentiment, sentiment, how we revelled in it! I learned all such songs. But Douglas was unconcerned. He already knew the greatest song masterpiece of all ages and had as well the superb confidence that was necessary for its expression. He rocked and rocked in silence while we sang, but the moment we desisted, the masterpiece was uttered to all the world.

*"Up in the balloon, boys,  
Up in the balloon,  
Up in the balloon, boys,  
Up in the balloon"*

Sometimes Alice MacDonald would sing *Ben Lomond*, or *Coming Through the Rye*, or *Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon*. Again it would be some old-fashioned hymn, for she was God-fearing. Frequently her tears would come and I would wonder at that and want to cry too. Poor old Big Mother was a sinner of an uneasy conscience who bitterly repented her addiction to the craving.

When the tall trees had faded into the dark sky, when each bird had grown silent, we would go indoors, unless there were an early moon. If there were an early moon, we would remain late until a gust of cold air set someone shivering. Then we would hurry inside. Grandmother would light the kerosene lamp. Although the oldest, I was put to bed before my brother, a ranking injustice. When I was safely out of the way my brother and uncles had a nightly pantomime to play. "Time to go to bed," my uncles would say. "I won't go to bed," my brother would reply emphatically, thumping on the table with his clenched fist.

Everyone would roar with delight at the dialogue and pantomime and it would be repeated time and again. There is unending joy in such simplicities. Every visitor was entertained with a complete performance. Children are essentially imitative, even of their smaller brothers. One night I thought that what was good enough for my smaller brother was good enough for me. I would steal my brother's thunder. Alas, I was without guile. What was required was originality not imitation. Besides, I was sullen and resentful at being compelled to go first, and sullenness is poor armour for a child seeking goodwill.

"Come, Albany," said my uncle, "time to go to bed."

"I won't go to bed," I blurted back sulkily from the sofa.

"Won't you?" answered my uncle. "We'll make up your mind for you."



He gave me a few stinging slaps and I changed my mind at once. Furious and tearful from beneath the sheets, I heard my sixteen or seventeen-year-old uncle telling a visitor he didn't believe in spoiling children. And then as I lay on the pillow I heard my brother thumping the table amid uproarious approval. My brother held the centre of the stage and I was subdued. Life is erratic and one blunders from the very best of intentions.

But on some nights, even I would strut across the stage. I would be undressed before the kitchen fire, and in the light of fire and lamplight I would listen to comment upon my starveling body.

"Bless the boy," Alice MacDonald would say. "He's skin and bone only."

"A regular Indian famine boy," from my uncles.

At that time Christian Missions were collecting money to feed starving children in India and were illustrating their appeal literature with ghastly photographs.

"You can count his ribs."

'Puir Barn'—that was Alice MacDonald's invariable comment. "Puir Barn."

"Tuchuck, tuchuck, tuchuck," she would go with her tongue and lips.

'How his mother kept him alive is beyond my ken.'

How proud I was then of my starveling, fleshless ribs! What a mark of distinction they were. They could be counted, and that was a great something. I was an Indian famine boy. I basked in the fame of my leanness. Poverty was a credit instead of a debit. I was at the centre of the stage, a stringy mite, bone, skin, hair. My vanity was gratified. Everyone would run a hand over my fleshless ribs, for never had there been such a set of protruding ribs in this world. Douglas couldn't beat me there. Despite his similarity of upbringing, he was irretrievably round and plump—chubby is the word. What an unutterable contempt I had for his mediocre tubbiness. I was thin, thin, thin, dangerously frail. I had become notorious. Blessed were the starvelings for they were stout in fame. 'Puir Barn.' How gratified I was to excel! How I hated the singlet that came down on my ribs as a curtain.

shuts down eventually on the greatest artist I was a "Puir Bairn"

There were always prayers by the fireside, the Lord's Prayer and some others I have forgotten We repeated our prayers by Big Mother's knee, although on cold nights we were permitted to be in bed first Alice MacDonald's religion was kindly, not stern and inhuman Not that we became holy The recital of prayers was merely a literary exercise

"Puir Bairn," she would say as she tucked me in And I would lay awake overjoyed at my success running my hand over my ribs I was a 'Puir Bairn' I was an 'Indian famine boy' I was famous I was able to glow with the elation of applause received and deserved for an outstanding performance

## Riding broomsticks

THE witch of Endor is not alone in having ridden a broomstick, nor is the cow of the nursery rhyme the only animal ever to jump over the moon We all ride broomsticks We straddle fountain pens or pencils or typewriters and ride fancy beyond the planets I had a paddock in which to let my mind roam freely, it was sufficient at my time of life That paddock had a spaciousness which makes the whole world of adult days seem cramped Every square inch of soil had variety and I seemed to wear a differently coloured pair of spectacles with each day My mind gave that paddock length and breadth that adult horizons lack and it possessed the dimensions of height and depth as well As I grew stronger and more daring, even higher and more precarious pine boughs lured me on towards the tip itself, which was an ambition

Very early I had a garden, a miniature plot in the shade of a tall tree, a square yard of soil in which to delve, burrow, or plant The garden of the grown-ups was replete with large, richly faced pansies, but in my horticultural ignorance those large varieties were not to be compared to the varieties I grew. I had all the tiny-faced dwarfs, the horticultural rever-

sions culled contemptuously from the garden of the adults. Something in tiny, impish faces satisfies the child soul and I culled the large and opulent to make way for my congregation of imps. Small boys and girls have title to all manner of tiny things except in the world of edibles, which proves the exception. I worshipped each miniature face for itself, and horticultural vanity was not in me. Full many an hour I have lain on my belly, face in hands, enraptured by the pert cheekiness of my congregation. The household made good-natured fun of my preference, but I was unmoved by such banter and clung tenaciously to my faith, because, intuitively, I knew those cheeky faces peered back at me with reciprocal understanding. The other day I offered children the choice of my pansy garden and all ignored the velvety beauties to select some impish-faced flowers no better than weeds. I was no exception.

Douglas was too small to be interested in a garden except for the fun of planting. He planted rootless twigs which withered and faded as soon as they were planted, but since they were forgotten before they withered, all was well. My plot of soil was my uninterrupted possession. Alas, my garden flourished when it was forgotten and perished under the excess of my attention and industry. For when a plant had ceased to flower, I removed it regularly to a new position until it was doomed. There was frequently a general post until the foliage of all my flowers wilted. I dug up each plant to examine the roots and see if they were growing. Then, with my garden wrecked, I would forget about it until one day the resurgence of growth would cause me to discover it anew.

There was a dirty little pond in the paddock on which ducks majestically floated—although I soon saw through ducks and credited them with a noisy messiness rather than majesty. I wanted a duck with enough intelligence to sail from point to point at my order. They were such haphazard, aimless paddlers that the pond seemed wasted upon them. Ducks did not know their business. I wanted a duck that would permit me to put a loop around its neck and tie it up as one would tie a boat, a duck that would swim to order in graceful, curving

lines instead of pausing to elevate an unsatisfactory and wagging tail to heaven while it groped in filthy mud at the bottom of the pond Ducks were stupid, although now and then a duck laid a special egg for me. Alice MacDonald used to give me her personal assurance that it was so, and a spoonful of yellow yolk could excuse a ton of stupidity

The five-barred swinging gate we used to ride was a testing and schooling-place for skill and courage The top rail was high enough above the road for a child and was the means of developing an audacity that caused us to spurn gate-tops and climb higher into tall pines But above all, in the paddock, there were two willow trees which seemed to have been grown for the special delectation of small boys. The trees had been severely pruned and were standing out hundreds of shoots which imagination and a little trimming transformed into swords. Switches, horses, willow sticks are the most romantic of terrestrial cavalry, horses upon which, a-straddle, all the million of small country boys have careered to the very frontiers of imagination In these days, when boys and girls have grown blasé upon a regular diet of moving pictures, they would sneer at an infant who could let his imagination ride a willow stick, a magic carpet, or anything less than a sixty-mile-an-hour train, a hundred mile-an-hour car, or a meteor-like aeroplane. Not that these moderns do not get the same thrill out of steam and oil, but that there was much to be said for the simplicity of a willow stick.

We all love to career imaginatively, fashioning worlds, riding over the moon on broomsticks Wells wasn't the first man in the moon by a long chalk With some the willow stick is a fountain pen and was not cut from a leafy tree with grandmother's sharp kitchen knife. Wells, riding to the moon, fashioned a spell far more entertaining than he has ever achieved when limited by the economics of earth; Bernard Shaw shoots back to Methuselah without even the aid of Wells' Time Machine; back to Methuselah and onward to an evolutionary chamber of horrors where Biological Burbanks make three heads grow where one grew before. One rides a pen, one a pencil, another a typewriter, some float off on a glass of alcohol with frothy-coloured spectacles on the nose,

some a cylinder of finely cut nicotine, and off all go into a space where rules are made to accommodate mood Outward we all career until meal time

I can ride out of life on a flood of music I know nothing of the technology of music although I have unfaltering memory for scores When I listen to music I either intercept an animal rhythm that sets my body jiggling and vibrating, or something happens to set my mind free from my body so that I chase an idea out of the auditorium as airily as one would pursue a thistle seed Maybe one is fortunate to have no technical appreciation of music, for then one's enchantment might be as with old fashioned jugglery, interest in amazing skill breathlessness for the catastrophe that is always averted As it is music of sorts sets my soul riding willow sticks so that I am never so far from melody as when under its influence

What then did it matter that my charger never lifted his tail from the grass or clattered his hoofs against the road Actually inherent in the willow stick were all the qualities of all the world's charges From the saddle of the stick one went galloping like a comet around the entire universe And I was born on Halloween, witches' night, and fresh willow sticks are living cousins of the broomsticks At the corners of the paddock I had my steeds stabled, every steed suitably named, so that, however I tired the horse, I could always struggle back In later years, when I developed size and importance and when the world had contracted a little, I never derived the joy from flesh and blood horses that came from the willow stick And I loved to ride round cattle and sheep on a good horse, feel the living, moving beast between the pressure of my knees, but the muscular movement lacked the mental magic of the willow In the stable of willow sticks a very small boy may be a very great king; in the world of real horses and cattle and sheep I was a menial of humble position

Dick Turpin's ride to York was never so eventful as the gallop round the paddock I would halt at the pond to give the horse a drink, or stop sometimes to drape its neck with a daisy chain Sometimes I would gather a handful of buttercups or white dog daisies and gallop the tribute home to Big Mother. And Alice MacDonald knew royally how to enter

into the spirit of such gifts. Sometimes I would dash furiously into a corner to slash and cut at a dewy cobweb, routing, discomforting, killing spiders. Another time I would launch a destructive attack upon the heavy gorse petals, viciously chopping them down with my sword until the air was heavy with the odour of outraged blossoms. There was the sombre shade of overhanging pine branches to sneak into, but the lonely gloom soon chilled my ardour and was never long endured. Those gloomy places were accepted or denied according to the courage of the moment, although hardihood was all the time a developing quality. Where one ventured furtively on Monday, one approached without a tremor by the week end. Thus was the world of the paddock conquered. And I was pressing into other worlds.

A day came when I was through the boundary pines and on through a hole in a broom hedge into the wheat field beyond. Bravely I went into tall wheat that waved above my head, but then, spirits failing, I turned and fled in tears. Nor did I return for over a week. Those experiences of fear always remain vividly in the memory. When I went again the wheat-field had no terrors. I chewed the milky juice <sup>ears that I</sup> plucked, chewed the succulent soft <sup>ted.</sup> that I tore from their growing joints. And I was pressing a regular rendezvous, very much so as and I learned to rub and blow soft g same gradual penetration was used to on the other side of the paddock, b turnips break down trepidation with ted my teeth and bloated my stomach achieve prodigies for soft turnips. I pulent motorists sneak into a field th pluck a white turnip or two.

Thus barriers were always falling c came when I advanced through the courageously in the middle of the through the bottom railings, dragged r my horse that could jump over the materially high as the top of a five ba 1 1 1 1 1 to the open road was a daring act, for the road ran unfenced

in one direction for miles and with neither beast nor man on it. A few yards in the other direction the road turned a corner so that I could not tell what approached from that angle. I surveyed the road with pride, but almost instantly terror drove me back. I was afraid a stockman might come hurrying a bullock round the corner on the way to the slaughter house. I even left my noble willow steed lying in the dust, act of reprehensible desertion. But soon I was beyond the gate again, viewing with bold interest the railway line and the platelayer's trolley, the piles of fish plates, bolts, and the metal junk.

Thus horizons expanded. Hedges were to day forbidding obstacles, the day after they were boldly viewed from the opposite side. The gloom below trees was chilling to spirits on Monday and shady refuge from the hot sun the next Monday. The wheat fields yielded the birds and myself a tribute, the turnip fields sharpened my teeth and the teeth of the rabbits. The song of the grasshopper, the explosion of hot broom pods, the spurting of the seed, the chirping of birds, the occasional presence of my brother—for I usually played a lone hand—all gladdened my heart, emboldened me to move on, and farther on, away from the front door. My brother's presence caused me to conquer myself and to exalt over him, it set me doing the things I feared to do for the sake of vaunting my superiority. Barriers fell down, were surmounted, or seemed to recede. Lengthening legs aided the expansion, but a keen imagination drove the skinny legs on. And every barrier that fell down revealed only another obstacle, higher, apparently more unsurmountable, and yet demanding to be overcome. Only one barrier was impregnable, and amid all this glorious world I never lost consciousness of it. That barrier was the knowledge of poverty. For always Alice MacDonald was thinking of the future and audibly wondering what would happen to the "Puir Bairns."

## Expanding horizons

EACH adventure to new territory brought new wonders. Life to the child is one long succession of virginal experiences and

every step leads to a fresh marvel There was a gently flowing creek that ran under the dusty road through a wooden culvert, its flow impeded by masses of succulent cress Minnows and cockabullies darted in and out of the cress or lazed stationary against the stream of flowing water feasting or fasting phenomenon that always arrested the attention of children's eyes When I first found the creek I played the part of the crystal gazer, and, fascinated I would lie on my belly on the culvert, peering down at the pausing and darting fish I have stared at flowing water until I became possessed with the illusion that the culvert was a sort of magic carpet on which I was moving upstream And I was the king of an aquatic kingdom, a kingdom I ruled by the mere act of beholding The minnows were my friends And then my uncles taught me how life could be captured and destroyed and I succumbed to the lust I had tried in friendliness to catch the little fish by scooping out their darting forms with my cupped hands but in this effort I had been unsuccessful Always I was sure I had a handful, but invariably they had scooted away My uncle with sophistication a worm, and a bent pin, taught me how to get them I had no great measure of skill and not too much patience, and the worm I used as bait was stolen from the hook most of the time with no little harm to the fish, for angling is a matter of temperament and I am no fisherman

New Zealand is hailed all over the world as an angler's paradise, and fishermen come to us annually from northern spheres to fish in river, lake, and open sea, but for all the fact that the pastime is national and that I like fish as an article of diet, I am no fisherman Why is it that the most placid creatures who shudder at a bitterly fought football match love to drive a steel hook into a fish's gullet and drag the fish around until it is drowned In later years I could drop a piece of explosive in a pool and dive in following the concussion to fill the frying pan, but the urge was purely from my stomach

Railway lines are magnets to all children The railway line across the road yielded its familiarity The line had invited me for months from the top of the gate before I dared We used to ride the gate top to watch the evening train come thundering by, the train that brought the mail from Dunedin and that on



winter evenings became an animate monster vomiting sparks against the black sky The line had always beckoned but the admonitions of the elders were prohibitory 'Stay in the section " One day we achieved

Right across from our gate the platelayer's trolley was parked each evening although they didn't call it 'parked' in those days and at the trolley siding were all the impediments of the gang There was a square criss crossed pile of sleepers heaps of steel plates and nuts and bolts and spikes and a wealth of unused scrap iron and junk to play with

And the railway lines excited the imagination of even adults Our uncles used to clap their ears to the telegraph posts and avow that the humming of wind in the wires was the vibration of speeding messages, a statement we found easy of belief In those days they might have believed it so They would clap their heads against the iron rail and swear they could hear the pounding of wheels twenty miles away, and they would weightily predict the exact time of the train's arrival The fact that they knew the exact time of arrival in no way lessened our admiration of our uncles' remarkable judgment We did not know that our uncles read Indian fiction and that youthful as well as baby minds rode willow sticks Once having ventured with our uncles, the platelayer's siding was no longer a no man's land to my brother and me although I generally went alone while my brother adhered to the precincts of the house I was a vagabond from the outset, whereas my brother had a domesticity that kept him near the threshold Perhaps a fence to him was a security from invasion To me a fence a wall has ever been a challenge Some personal force always kept him at the centre He wanted to play the games he knew in the places he knew The same personal forces drove me outward, away Sometimes his presence was helpful kept me back when I should have been kept back Generally he was too matter of fact, too much inclined to set irksome limits to my imaginative flights for me to want him as a playmate I was always happy when alone frequently enchanted and spell bound by the mesmeric power of imagination To share a dream with a partner who refused to dream was a devastating experience The dream was shattered to a thousand fragments,

and an inner nakedness was exposed that sent one away in blushing confusion Douglas could see the outsides of things more distinctly than any boy I ever knew, whereas I seemed to get the essence of a thing rather than its length, breadth, and depth

The railway line was built on alluvial country, and shingle for the bed of the sleepers had been borrowed from deep indentations that ran along each side of the track These indentations were so deep that a little fellow like myself could walk upright in them and be concealed from observation by anyone on the parallel road Indeed I could hide on the road-side itself, for, apart from where the traffic ran, it was covered with waving tussocks The bottoms of the indentations had long before sprouted native grasses and weeds There was a native weed that grew a tiny edible berry The berry was nearly all stone, a sweet fruit so small that the diligence of hours was necessary for the accumulation of a tiny handful I have gathered for a whole afternoon to enjoy the rare delight and flavour of that delicious mouthful Poor children with ample time to do such things In poor homes children will diligently separate a few raisins and currants from a plateful of boiled rice so as to finish a dreary meal on a heroic note A child has an hour to gather a mouthful, for all life stretches ahead, and he knows no urgency greater than satisfying the palate

When I went to the ditch I rode the willow stick and carried a pepper tin of chaff and oats on the crupper to keep the steed from pawing hungrily while I dallied A tin of chaff, a strong halter, are great aids to illusion Down in the ditch were many rabbit burrows, for the soft earth was easy tunnelling Like a rabbit, I would sometimes try to scratch my way into the burrow to capture the inhabitants, but zeal rarely survived many minutes of such hard work

As I played alone or as I played with my brother or as I lay revelling in plumelike tussock fashioning a dream, the voice of Alice MacDonald would ring out from the doorstep She always feared lest we be killed by a passing train

"Albany!"

"Yes, Big Mother"

Home we would go, to watch the passing of the train from the top of the gate.

To children everything is beautiful. Calves, foals, chickens, kittens, puppies, minnows, everything cast on a tiny scale whether animal or vegetable. My brother and I discovered a litter of rabbits. We had an old dog, and we took him to the ditch and he grew unusually excited alongside of a rabbit burrow where, with our aid, he was soon sending out a torrent of earth. Soon, with our united efforts, we had uncovered the family. The old dog's sense of beauty was located at the pit of his stomach. Two of the family disappeared in two gulps, eaten alive and warm. We drove our dog off, took possession of the other three members of the family and bore them proudly home. The dog followed, wagging his tail in anticipation.

"What have you got?" asked Uncle Donald.

"Dear wee bunnies," very proudly.

"Let me see."

We surrendered the tiny, newly born trophies. Uncle Donald held a baby rabbit high by the back legs, and the dog sat in eagerness wagging its tail.

"Here," he called to the dog.

He tossed a ball of fur and the open mouth caught.

"Gulp." The rabbit was gone.

"Here," he tossed another.

"Gulp." The second was gone, and the tail still zig-zagged.

"Catch." The third circled into the open mouth.

"Gulp." The whole litter was gone.

And the tail still wagged as though my uncle were a conjurer with a whole warren up his sleeve. With five warm rabbits in his paunch the old dog went to sleep in the sun. My brother and I withdrew in tearful retreat, pursued by our uncle's laughter. Sad at heart, we vowed never to bring live rabbits home again.

I winced at other cruelties of my uncle. He put some kittens in a bag and sent me to drop the bag in the creek. When I got to the creek I untied the knot and tearfully fondled the mewling family. I ended by compromising between sentiment and duty. From the culvert I tipped the kittens out of the bag. Swiftly

they swam ashore. The old cat arrived to carry them home again, and the world grew bright once more. Pussy set off and reached home ahead of me. Before the day was out my uncle found the kittens curled up in their nest in the shed. "Umm," he exclaimed ominously. He put each kitten at the top of a post and shot them. Gloom descended upon the household once more.

But I soon grew calloused. One grows careless of life in rural atmospheres, where almost everything is being raised to kill. On winter evenings, I ventured around some rabbit traps with my uncle to reset the traps that had already possessed a rabbit with their steel jaws. I soon ceased to wince at cruelty. The adult human can glorify even the slaughter of humans when necessary. But children are so near to all wild things that moments of playful tenderness alternate with moments of savage, wanton cruelty. I went ferreting with my uncles. I hated the tribe of ferrets, with their slender bodies and cruel pink eyes, and pitied the rabbits. When a stoat or a weasel got caught in a rabbit trap I could watch my uncle batter tenacious life out of its squirming body without a tremor, although the memory might subsequently disturb my sleep. Maybe the knowledge that the stoat or weasel was a killer hardened my heart.

Children are cruel; children are tender. I wept over the death of kittens and savagely struck the mother cruel blows before many days were gone by. But kindness was my habit and cruelty my aberration. If I was cruel, it was in the presence of other children, and my cruelty was the exhibitionism of the public performer. For children love to walk to glory even over the prostrate carcasses of friends, and many a grown-up critic is cruel in words for precisely the same reason. His own carcass unattractive, he yet excites attention by wounding someone greater. The desire to wound is not the cause; the critic is kindly but he has a desire to be noticed. So I shed tears over kittens and was often merciless to tabby.

## PART THREE

### The Battle of the Drainpipe

THROUGHOUT my life I have wondered whether I am brave or cowardly, debating that question with myself innumerable times. There are hundreds of things I have wanted to do but which I have not done at the moment of fear. And yet I know that if I fear very much to do something and I still sustain the desire, a time will come when I shall do that very thing, even if I attempt it while in a state of complete funk. And I wonder whether trepidation is conquered because I am courageous or because a cynical something sneers at the coward until he makes heroic pretence. Do I do what I fear to do merely to assert to myself that I am something that I am not? One's own judgments of oneself are faulty. Does the man or woman with the most delicate inside develop the toughest shell? Is one driven at times despite fear, solely for the purpose of retaining one's own self-respect? For one not only conquers fear in the presence of the outward observer. The man or woman of action conquers fear as the internal observing philosopher beholds the internal coward of the man of action. At a very early date I was fighting between hero and coward in my own person when no one watched except that introspective cynic. The dreamer in man derives satisfaction and sorrow from beholding the vacillations of the man of action. At a very early date I was fighting battles with myself. I climbed out to the top of branches with my heart in my mouth to test myself, climbed even farther in that mood than I would have climbed when spurred on with the vain ambition

to surpass the efforts and secure the approval and envy of all spectators I walked into the middle of paddocks where angry steers pawed the earth and remained so starkly alert in what I believed to be danger that the angry snort of a beast might have settled the beating of my heart

First the desire to take these risks came and then, the battle with my fear, and finally the act itself The hero would swagger with his teeth chattering to satisfy the demands of the dreamer within I have taken risks that left me waking and dreaming, for days distraught with terror Probably I struggled with exaggerated dangers but let us not underestimate the intangible terrors the mind conjures up In this way I came to fight the Battle of the Drainpipe the greatest battle in which I ever fought mightier by far than the first or second or third Ypres offensive Even to day in manhood I tremble as I recall the terror of that conflict

There was a concrete pipe about twenty feet long that ran under the railway line It was round in shape and about eighteen inches in diameter Except when torrential rain fell the pipe was dry I used to peer through it from either end and look at the inviting circle of daylight at the other extremity but in the centre the pipe seemed abnormally gloomy The circle of light at the other end the tunnel between, came to have for me a terrifying attraction Week after week, I came to peer through at the bright circle of brilliant sunlight at the other end Gradually the most inviting hazard in all the world came to be the act of crawling on hands and knees through the tunnel And fear to venture grew as the attraction of the venture intensified From going each day to the drainpipe, I started to go a dozen times daily I sat by the outlets and tried to steel a quaking heart There was a nervous wall to surmount That pipe seemed as if it were made to fit my body as in a glove, actually it was large enough to permit the passage of a corpulent man I dreamed about the day I would attack that pipe until fear and desire conjured the pipe into a monster Fear and resolution developed together I knew I would sometime have to crawl through that pipe or die I saw myself in heroic determination crawling, crawling thrillingly I felt electric waves of delicious nobility

and chilling terror course over me at the thought. I had to crawl. The hero had to crawl over the prostrate body of the coward or the coward had to crawl spurred on by the hero. I did not have it verbally clear like that, not in those days. The urge and the fear were beyond a child's analysis. But a time came when I had to go through or become ill. If I had been defeated I should have been left for the rest of my life crouching at the bottom of a great wall. It would have been easier to have been a conscientious objector in the great war than not to have made the transit. I never confided in anyone because I shrivelled before satirical laughter. Perhaps I would tell after I had demonstrated my bravery. I went about for weeks brooding, my mind full of concrete drain pipe. Are not most of the dragons we slay of our own creation?

Came at last a great day on which the circle of sunlight at the far end of the pipe was more fascinatingly brilliant than ever, an alluring zero hour. I started crawling, but after a few feet resolution fled completely. The brilliant end of the pipe seemed a day's march away. The silent gloom was awful and my fear seemed to echo through it. I felt incredibly lonely. A chill caught at my spine and I sobbed with fright. But I crawled on. The few yards of the pipe seemed never ending, seemed to stretch as I progressed. I crawled. I crawled with a fury so that I bruised my knees and skinned my hands and elbows on the rough, coarse concrete.

At last. I emerged into the sunlight.

And I did not stand and turn around to contemplate in vanity the monster I had conquered, for the pipe had conquered me. As I stood in the sunlight I could feel that concrete tube reaching its influence after me as though it had clinging arms. I lacked the courage even to peer around for I wanted to escape from a beast made animate by my terror. If I had glanced back I should have been transfixed by the dark end of that sinister tube. My heart must have been pulsating furiously. I ran until I was in the house with Alice MacDonald, and, although the day was fine and the house was hot, I stayed around. She was curious.

"Bless the boy. What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Big Mother."

"Why don't you go out and play?"

"Don't want to go "

"Are you ill? You look white."

"No, Big Mother "

"Do you want a piece of bread?"

"No, Big Mother "

Even though Big Mother understood almost all such things, my fears and my achievements were my secrets I could not risk laughter How could I tell that first I had hazarded and then funk had frozen my spine? I sat down exhausted, to rest, and I fell asleep in the daylight Consternation reigned in Alice MacDonald's breast

"The bairn's ill "

That night, when nervously unsettled, I had a second terrifying experience Ghosts were very real to me because I was young But ghosts were very real to Alice MacDonald and all her family When my superstitious uncles and aunt told half-believed ghost stories I felt and saw all the presences they described My mind was a ready seed bed for fireside horrors That night it was a forcing house I sat with my back to the open door and my aunt told a ghost story about a fiend possessed with the quality of criminal invisibility a transparent beast and foul destroyer who caught at the throats of the living and throttled them to silence Suddenly I seemed to feel with my back how black and menacing the night was Imagination welled The draught caused me to shiver I could feel a quality of foul stealth in the darkness the invisible man was reaching reaching his hands were at my back, at my throat Probably all present enjoyed a thrill of terror as they listened, but they made pretences of indifference I cried aloud and in tears

"What's the matter? What's the matter?"

"I'm frightened "

"Don't be silly I am only telling a story "

"I'm frightened "

"No one will hurt you "

"Shut the door I'm frightened "

They shut the door and put me by the fireside and laughed and joked to cheer me, and themselves They made much of



my fear and of my brother's indifference. But he was too young to understand about invisible men and when he was older, he was never so impressionable.

Another ghost story was told of a man who lived in a room the shape of a coffin, and every day the room grew smaller until it squeezed him to death. I went to bed with the absurd idea that the drainpipe had the same quality of contraction, that it wanted to grow smaller and smaller, tighter and tighter, until my body was pressed in a concrete band and my head and heels alone protruded from the ends. That fantasy dominated my mind for weeks, and kept me away from the pipe. And then a great day came when the monster became a mere concrete pipe. The demon had been exorcised. I crawled through repeatedly and ended by pretending that I was a rabbit carrying in handfuls of tussock to make a couch. I enticed other children to see me perform the great transit, but they were not even impressed. Yet conquering that pipe was one of life's battles, as important to me as the discovery of America was to Columbus.

I grew stronger and more vigorous, though no fatter. I discovered that I could climb and cling, and I left the willow steed disgraced in the dust.

My skinny suppleness was an asset and I could climb and cling marvellously. My brother affected the low branches, but I went to the very tips of tall pines, up until they seemed to bend dangerously backward beneath my weight. While still a boy I could resist the dizziness of abnormal heights.

The pines were peopled with birds' nests, which were to be found in the most inaccessible places, nests of grey and white or speckled eggs, nests of large blue eggs, nests full of clamant nestlings, whose mouths were open to heaven for parental manna. I would climb high and descend laden with a loot we could blow and string in chains. I swallowed many a mouthful—egg, shell, embryo chick—for the mouth was the only receptacle and a misstep often caused unpremeditated gulping. I also threw down many a nest of fledglings. Sometimes, like a two-legged cuckoo, I would ring the changes on the eggs as though birds could be readily deceived. Sometimes I would kill the young, trying to teach them to fly by hurling

them into the air. The old tabby purred contentedly over many a bellyfull of evicted fledglings. Naked, featherless birds are so ugly that children have no patience with their clumsiness.

Long before I went to school I fought a battle in the air similar to my one at the drainpipe. I climbed higher because I was afraid to climb higher, going up with terror in my heart, forced on by no other audience than my own vanity. "You'll be a Blondin," my uncles prophesied. But I was climbing over spiritual barriers and the trees were merely incidental.

This strange self conflict drew me to the nearby slaughterhouse in the absence of the butcher. It was in a day when the law permitted butchers to feed raw blood and offal to the pigs in the slaughterhouse sties. The blood ran to the sties down a wooden drain. The offal was brought on the wheelbarrow. To see the swine at their horrible meal was a fearsome sight for a child, but I went alone one day to look at the vicious beasts. The troughs full of blood made me feel nausea, and their snouts and disgusting appearance as they chewed at offal terrified me, but I remained. Another wall was fallen down.

Over the railway line into far fields I also went. Across the tracks there was a deep plantation of tall pines that ran parallel to the line for a long distance. Once I climbed through the wire fence into the plantation, everything I valued was left behind, shut out completely by low branches. But on I went. An enormous gale had uprooted many trees, and the tangled roots of the uprooted giants seemed like ugly, twisted, agonized earthworms of gigantic size. I gazed at those roots and they seemed to live and I hurried home again.

I was back the next day, climbing over prostrate pine bodies and gathering pine cones for the pine hearth of Alice MacDonald and for the teeth of children. Placed by the fire, the cones would open and yield a palatable harvest of tiny seeds. Children's palates are attuned for all such flavours. And there were blobs of pine gum we could chew, enjoying their resinous flavours. The plantation bed was the home of huge clusters of giant toadstools, cities one could trample out of existence one day and find mysteriously restored next morning. Listening by the fireside to Alice MacDonald, I became an authority on fairy, gnome and sprite. I knew that Toadstool Town was

erected each night by eager workers, however vicious I was in my destruction. I destroyed to try and outwit them, but they were always too industrious.

Someone taught me rhymes which I memorized avidly. My uncles, surprised at my precocity, started to teach me the alphabet. I think their initial intention was to trick as much as to teach. They held out each letter as a trainer holds out a hoop for a trained animal. They expected me to jump, but, like the circus audience, they awaited the discomfiture of an odd crash. And, like a circus audience, they were disappointed. They bombarded me with the twenty-six letters. To their astonishment, I lapped them up as a kitten laps up fresh milk. I was inordinately proud of my ability. Soon my uncles began regarding me as a prodigy and started feeding me on a diet of primers. I was devouring school books long before my age and the law permitted me to go to school. This was a performance my brother could not trump. I could climb, I could spell and read, I was famously thin, I was proud.

"The bairn will get on in the world."

Alice MacDonald desired me to get on, and her words were as much a prayer as a prophecy. I shone with self-appreciated cleverness. I was kept out of bed to show the visitors what a smart boy Albany was. It was not a case of learning for its own sake. It was learning to enable my uncles to boast, learning to enable me to strut with my ego in the hearth light.

But all this expansion, this receding of horizons, did not obliterate one barrier. I knew increasingly that mother was poor. I knew that mother could not feed me, and that I was living with my grandparents on sufferance. I heard the grown-ups talk of my mother, of her drudgery and poor wages, of her desperate future with growing children. Mother used to send us clothing, the second-hand, rejected garments of the children of the rich; but so long as our nakedness was covered we were happy, never bothering much about a few patches while in the country. And in some manner, I knew that my mother in Dunedin had less than anyone in our Riversdale home. The subject must have been discussed until my physical being absorbed the knowledge. "Poor Bella," Alice MacDonald

would say. "Poor Bella. Tuchuck! tuchuck! tuchuck!" her tongue would go.

## Family squalls

I THINK at that time the home might have fared well had it not been for Big Mother's periodical outbursts. My two uncles were adding a modicum to the family exchequer, but her liquor absorbed so much of the family income that each monthly account day was dreaded. The grocer was also Sandy's employer and he, being a Scot and a Presbyterian, always gave Sandy the account and his wages simultaneously and stood about coughing until Sandy paid his bill. Sandy then arrived home with the remains of his wages and the account. The house trembled as Sandy sat at the kitchen table and took the account out of the envelope to examine each item and offer up his advice.

"Alice, get my spectacles."

Alice MacDonald would get the spectacles, and after getting them she would tremble before the wrath that was to come. She knew she was at fault in her liquor habit, and she knew that Sandy always used the monthly account as the starting point for an anti-liquor lecture. "Ahem!" Sandy would clear his throat and his brow would cloud.

Sandy would not have cared what Alice MacDonald had bought had it not been for liquor, for she was a frugal soul. And he had not the heart for a frontal attack, so must needs begin obliquely. Had his temper been such as to permit a calm, judicial severity, Sandy would have made Alice MacDonald very penitent indeed, but the pepper, the spice, the cayenne, the chilies, the mustard and cloves would start to simmer. His face would glow, and he would take the account item by item.

"Tins of fruit. Peaches. You know, Alice, we can't afford tinned fruit."

"No. I bought a tin or two for the boys."

Alice MacDonald's lip would tremble contritely. She knew it was the liquor, and that tinned fruit was merely a stalking horse.

"Bought a tin or two for the boys out of my wages. You'd never think of keeping a mouthful for your own husband."

Big Mother always concealed the treats she gave her boys. They were the tribute the table yielded as apology for a drunken bout, but since they were put on the account instead of being paid for by cash she was always discovered.

"The boys are only young once. They are different. I had none myself."

And that would be true. Alice MacDonald loved dainties, but as like as not she kept her portion for Bella's children—myself and my brother. She loved the fruit, but she loved more the joy of making bairns happy.

"Different! Different! Different!" Sandy grew louder as the curry got to work.

"Tuchuck! tuchuck! tuchuck!" Alice would go.

In a few minutes, pretences were dropped. Tins of fruit, the account, the special favours for the boys were forgotten. The liquor habit became the storm centre. The mistakes and failings of thirty-five years were dragged from their cupboards. Like a volcano the old fellow would swell and sputter and erupt all his hot Indian condiments. No wonder I was afraid to eat peppercorns in red cabbage pickle for fear I would take after my grandfather.

"How can a baker prosper on his miserable wage if no one helps him?"

Poor old Sandy's grievance was honest, though his method of approach was wrong. His wife's fatal weakness had overburdened his years. Finally, and with icy scorn, Alice MacDonald would oppose his molten blasts. "Ca' yersel' a baker!" How often have I heard the phrase! "Ca' yersel' a baker!" What venom was expressed in the tone! Big Mother knew Sandy's weakness and his pride. "Why, the last batch you made was sour."

Nothing was more calculated to wound or put Sandy on the defensive. He would forget the liquor habit to defend his

bread against such a cruel insinuation. Peppercorns and spice would flavour the kitchen atmosphere.

"Every time you drive me from my home with liquor I get a new job. Do you think employers would chase me if I baked sour bread?"

"Ca' yersel' a baker! Sour bread baker. Hot temper and sour bread ruined your business, and you blame me. A good baker doesn't bake sour bread."

Sandy would prance and rave. His face would grow chili red. My brother and I would creep into a corner and pray that our presence would be unnoticed until the world grew more kindly.

"Woman, woman, why did I——"

"Sour bread baker."

"Why did I marry you?"

"Did I ask you to?"

"I might have expected it from a MacDonald"

"I never knew a decent Stuart."

All the dialogue was in a northern dialect. The skirl of pipes, the clash of tartans, India's spicy breezes made a queer pickle, and with each fresh ingredient the fury increased. At last Alice MacDonald, with chill deliberation, would reach for the teapot and, holding it by the spout and handle, hurl lid, liquid and leaves at Sandy. Sandy's face would drip with infused tea, and the leaves would gather on his beard or else would spatter the wall. The wallpaper bore witness to the regularity of monthly disturbances, and each receding tide of wrath left more brown spots, until tea spray, rather than lithographed flowers, determined the pattern. No one with a craze for modern decoration could have achieved a more unusual effect.

When the storm subsided in its flood of tea and leaves—and the pot seemed always to be full for the occasion—the old lady would lose her chill scorn. She would collapse in her chair and pillow her head on her arms on the table to cry bitterly, and freely confess her faults. And the confession was all Sandy required to soften his heart and make his lips quiver and his eyes grow moist. He would put his arms around her "shouters" and, tea leaves and all, place his greying beard against her cheek.

"There, there, Alice. Dry those tears now."

Sandy would see me in my corner.

"Run away and play, laddie."

I would run away and bear no witness to the further reconciliation, but when I returned tired, there would be a sad harmony in the kitchen. Perhaps Sandy would be sitting at a fresh pot of tea, eating a newly baked and well buttered scone and with professional authority and loving exaggeration assessing its qualities. I think both felt shame at the nature of their outbursts. And on the following Sunday they would go to kirk to adorn the Stuart pew, as though to show all the world the intention of a more worthy effort in the future.

Alas, when all the accounts were paid and there remained a few shillings in the purse to buy day-to-day requirements, Alice would sneak off to the good fellow at the hotel and would soon be so drunk that Sandy's ravings would fall upon oblivious ears. Drunkenness would continue for about two days and then for a month Big Mother would sigh and turn and attempt to cut down the bills against a future day of reckoning, but her frugality would at the same time be relieved by the purchase of some extravagant dainty for her boys as an act of penance. And that dainty fired the mine on the day of the next explosion.

When Grandmother was drunk, try as we would, we could not escape. When Grandmother was sober we never desired that we should escape.

"Albany!"

"Yes, Big Mother."

"Don't go away. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Big Mother."

"Albany," a little later.

"Yes, Big Mother."

"Get me a glass of water."

With her parched alcoholic palate she was always calling for glasses of water, something fluid and cool and clean.

"Albany!"

"Yes, Big Mother."

"Give me a kiss."

I remember it all because when Big Mother was drunken

and sottish she was the most loathsome hag in the whole world, it seemed to me.

"Douglas," I would say.

"Wot," he would answer from his cherubic lips.

"I wish Big Mother wasn't drunk."

"No dinner to-day."

"No dinner."

There never was any dinner when we were alone with our drunken Big Mother. If there was bread and butter we would help ourselves and listen to the stertorous breathing in the next room. The paddock temporarily lost its magic. The willow sticks became mere twigs. No imaginative steed could gallop away from thought of that awful hag in the back room.

"Albany!"

"Yes, Big Mother."

"Keep watch and tell me when your grandfather's coming."

I used to keep watch until I saw Sandy Stuart striding up the shingle ballast track alongside the railway line. My grandmother would struggle to her feet and stagger around the house believing, with that absurd intoxicated faith that believes anything, that she could deceive her husband. The old fellow would not erupt when she was drunk, for he was aware of the futility of protest at such a moment. He would sigh and grunt and bide his time, give the mustard and peppercorns three weeks to simmer inwardly. He would sit in his chair with his whiskered face cupped in his hands and sigh from a weariness caused by more than very arduous physical labour. And Big Mother would stumble around, deceiving herself that she deceived her husband. The cheap clock seemed to tick very loudly at such moments. Probably Sandy would wonder how much longer he could endure it, before throwing up his work to flee. And that was useless too, I suppose. Despair had been driving him away and onward to return again, all his married life. Fresh starts and inevitable disappointments. How weary Sandy used to look! So weary one could almost love him, beard and all.

And Alice MacDonald was a tragic sinner. Her sin brought her no joy other than a moment's release from its contemplation. For when sober she often sat brooding over her weak-



ness and the wreckage she had provoked After every bout she sat at home, not pitying but spurning herself She truly repented, but for her there was no earthly salvation She knew not the ease of vicarious atonement, her penance was of the flesh and the spirit No wonder Alice MacDonald excused and sheltered all who sinned She knew she had wronged Douglas and myself by drunkenness and she made amends to us She became a girl instead of a grandmother and told us the inner meaning of all bird songs, and why the flowers had perfume, and she was profound in her knowledge of how to make us happy It seemed, indeed, as she talked, that birds toned every note for baby ears and that flowers lavished their perfume upon the air to catch children's nostrils She invoked all those sentimental aids that all girls and all mothers and all grandmothers of the working class know, and Big Mother knew them all superlatively and had a profound gift of exposition When she made believe, the creatures of her fancy danced their moment before our very eyes She even would pack a poor sandwich or two and take us a few hundred yards away into the plantation to boil the billy and create the atmosphere of picnic despite the frugal viands Looking backward, I see that those must have been precious moments of escape from reality for Alice MacDonald as well as for us She knew the intoxication of the soul without the sin of the flesh when she told us her stories

Douglas vanished How or why is beyond recollection I cannot recall his departure He merely is suddenly absent Fortune must have relented a little towards my mother, for he went back to Dunedin and I was left alone in Riversdale But solitariness never bothered me The more I was left to myself, the greater the throng of people and incidents in my day-dreams The absence of matter-of-fact people who saw only what existed liberated my mind A thousand new impressions crowded upon me as barriers fell down, and made me unaware of Douglas's absence He must have gone in the springtime, for I remember the earth coming to life as I played around alone I found little spiders that burrowed and tunneled into soft banks, and I found that if I inserted a straw or a piece of grass into their tunnels and waited until the grass or

straw commenced to move and then gave the straw or grass rod a sharp tug, I could draw out the clinging spider. I found black earth on white clay where I could delve for fat earth-worms that glowed at night and that were appreciated when my uncles went trout fishing. I discovered Pukeko, the New Zealand swamp hen, strutting in a nearby swamp. And in the swamp I found tall spikes of a swamp flower to gather in armfuls. There were millions of buttercups and long-stemmed white daisies. Bees came to drink honey from the heavy yellow gorse. A tall weed, regwort, I think, harboured thousands of black and hundreds of crimson butterflies. And butterflies in their drunken moments of life are easy for children to catch. I decorated the wallpaper with beauties impaled upon cruel pins until butterflies played as important a part in the pattern on the walls as the brown tea spots. I hung festoons of birds' eggs around the edge of pictures. And my uncle found me a market for fledglings' heads. County Councils in their efforts to reduce the quantity of wheat- and oat-eaters paid a penny a dozen for the heads of sparrows. I must have made a few pence a week.

And when my brother had gone I adopted a different procedure when Alice MacDonald was unusually sottish. She would be left to seek water for her own parched throat. I would be borne off in the darkness of morning to the warm bakehouse and left to sleep on clean sacks in a warm corner, leaving Big Mother in maudlin loneliness. When I awakened each morning I would find Sandy thrusting dough into the oven with his long baker's implement. And the bakehouse was envied of all the boys in the village. Yet I can honestly say I would rather Big Mother sober than all the bakehouse miracles, for even with my mouth full of raisins, I could not free my mind from the thought of her.

In the bakehouse I bloated my paunch and sated all the greedy appetites of a poor child. Bread in the trough was not very attractive, and the dough seemed less so as it was shaped by my sweating grandfather, down whose arms and forehead moisture dripped. But fire is the great purifier. When the sagging dough had been thrust into the rear of the oven and baked until crusts were brown, the taint of honest sweat was

no more And I was permitted to tug the little brown superfluous blobs from odd loaves and eat them as soon as my lungs could fan them to suitable coolness And the old soldier made good wholesome bread, although once a month Big Mother pierced his heart with taunts of its sourness

"Sour bread You know it's sour Ca' yersel' a baker "

The flavours of the world were in the bakehouse There was brown sugar in those split cane sacks we never see these days There were boxes of currants and clusters of raisins There was orange and lemon peel, and Sandy saved me all the pieces of flavoured sugar that adhered to them Sandy was too good a Scot to mind one of his ain eating his employer's fruit 'Eat up The rats eat more every night "

Sandy even baked me a cake or two, and permitted me to stand on an empty case and clutch the oar while he steered the cake into the oven And like Alice MacDonald he was not immune to the praise and delight of children He would beam at me as I nibbled and enjoyed my approval as though I were a great authority And children of the poor are merely quantitative authorities, 'o all such there is no such thing as poor cake Every few minutes he would call for verbal acknowledgment of his prowess

"D'ye like it? "

"Um," from behind a mouthful

"It's nae sour, is it?" How his wife's taunt rankled

'No——o " What would have happened had I said yes?

I would steal pockets of peel to tide me over until the next bout of drunkenness I would sneak pokefuls of brown sugar What unpalatable, sterile, lifeless stuff white crystals are beside that memory of brown sugar full of vegetable impurities

"Dinna let the boss see what's in your pockets, laddie "

"No——o " My mouth was always too full for other than monosyllables in the bakehouse

"The hot cake will ruin your belly."

I laughed at that remark To me it seemed the quintessence of wit As if hot cake could be bad for any stomach

'Why dinna ye get fat, bairn?"

It wasn't Sandy's fault 'I did na "

Grandfather wasn't a bad o'd volcano between eruptions,

and if he had not been so liable to go up without warning, even eruptions might have been tolerable. But just a reverberation or two and up shot all India's hot spices and peppers.

## Our family and God

WE were a religious family. Our grandfather was proud of his name spelt in ink at the end of his pew, but I confess that my only religious ambitions were to pull the bell and find out how the hive of bees had managed to locate themselves in the vestry chimney. Of course, all children enjoy the hymns adults sing, because most hymns have been written for primitive minds and are the delight of the young if the despair of philosophers. The Jesus and God of hymns are fairy princes and princesses, unbending potentates, five-headed giants. Jesus and the angels waved flaming swords and routed ogres like true heroes and heroines. Hymns are fun, but long-winded prayers and dissertations on self-abasement, which torture children interminably in aching postures under the stern eyes of elders who play at being minor gods, are incredibly dreary.

When the morning sun shone on the church roof and cut slantwise through the coloured windows, the air quivered with the heat, and the pores of everyone exuded sanctimonious sweat. In this uncomfortable atmosphere the Presbyterian parson would drawl each syllable, rattling and rolling each r, dragging phrases from his lips with a slowness so irritating that the minds of even children might stumble ahead to attempt completion of each sentence. Prayer was tiring in the extreme, in an atmosphere of tense, sweaty, shut-eyed sanctity, and my infantile knees would ache against hard boards. I knew, too, that Sandy, no matter how completely immersed in sanctimony he might be, would never forget to keep one half-open eye on my restless attempts at aching correctitude.

If prayer be the road to heaven, surely that prayer consists of the voluntary prostration of a soul in mute adoration and communion, but prayer that is a physical discipline of aching

knees amidst drawled r's is the highroad to juvenile unbelief, or, what is worse, juvenile belief allied with hatred Children do not drink at the fount because they are tethered in a pew I could never understand anything of the Riversdale Kirk services except that the parson had a drawling method Maybe the sermon came from a stomach heavily and nationally virtuous with porridge, and ham and eggs, and thickly buttered toast and tea, the intemperate sustenance of the abstainer, which forced words to jump a high starched collar which chafed and constricted an oscillating Adam's apple A parson might be jolly on such a breakfast and reflect the joy of Christian living, but Scotch Presbyterians are always "meeserable" No person ever yet looked like a saint after swallowing half a pound of sausages and a helping of fried potatoes, and Presbyterianism was hostile to jollity

It is the simple hymns that give children their place in the religious scheme, not as penitent sinners but as actors "You in your small corner and I in mine," doggerel for adults, delighted me I could at once see myself in a corner shining like a candle, pure and radiant with soaped holiness, unusually sleek of hair I also loved, "Shall we gather at the river?" that asinine bleat I heard some folk singing at the corner of the street a few nights ago I could see myself one of a joyous concourse which stood on clean shingles by the bank of the local river while across the turbulent stream sat God, garbed like a history book picture of King Canute, and feasting on our baby adulation I could see God, the gimcrack throne, and brummagem crown, flowing white robes, black leathern girdle, and everything that a king in a picture should possess I loved the positiveness of "Jesus loves me," and I sang the words with an emphatic ME I could feel a gentle hand patting me on the head "If those little ice cold fingers pressed against the window pane would be cold and stiff tomorrow, never trouble us again" How sad I was for myself as I sang those words and saw the grown-ups weeping over my waxy corpse because they had omitted some little kindness!

"Sit still," Sandy would hiss in my ear "Sit still barn," Alice MacDonald would touch me with reassuring kindness And the Meenister would continue like a "grrrand prrrreacher"

There is more religion in a game of footoall than in such a kirk Praise the Lord for internal combustion and pneumatic tyres, for people worship in the fields these days Praise the Lord for the scantily costumed male and female figure that desecrates the Presbyterian sabbath by taking a neat header into pool or surf

Sandy was of the strict sabbatarian tradition To smile in kirk was next door to mortal sin One had to look stiff and uncomfortable or one was slacking And I never remember Alice MacDonald being drunk on a Sunday, although, of course hotels are closed on that day "Keep still Don't fidget," Cayenne peppercorns, mustard in the breath "Keep still, Albany" Alice MacDonald in her 'auld sweet way "

Fire and brimstone gave me an early bias, and I hated God because I feared His unrelenting power to punish However, I loved the Jesus of nursery rhyme hymns Jesus was one of my heroes Christ, like Grimm's characters had miraculous powers of the kind which appeal to childish minds He could float about on a cloud, He could by noble legerdemain fill an empty belly, and despite His extraordinary powers, He could take a child on His knee My appreciation of Him fluctuated between the admiration I might have for a conjurer and the sentiment I might have towards a warm bosomed aunt But God at an early age to me was like my knowledge of poverty, an understanding of the terrible I feared God and out of fear grew hatred, curious commentary on "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" He was the avenger of wrong-doing and, like the dreary parson, drawled His rs on a hot Sunday

In these days ninety per cent of churchmen are modernists, privately joke about virgin birth and use Cain and Abel to adorn a crude story, though on Sunday they still cram slabs of holy writ down childish throats as revealed truth The God I feared sat in the skies with an open book—what a piece of literature it must have been—and a pen behind His ear, waiting to pounce upon baby sins Every time I sinned, my account in eternity was debited Very early I knew that we were all a race of vile sinners, and that earth was a penitentiary before release into heaven or incarceration in a crueller penitentiary for an indeterminate sentence If I told a lie and was

found out, I was spanked, but the sin was not expiated. The avenging accountant added to my debit column, and I stood grave chance of being burnt by a God more merciless than my grandparents.

Fearing, I hated God, for I was at heart a sinner who wanted to ignore every injunction just to see what would happen as a consequence. At times, the awful intimacy of His all-knowingness paralysed my mind beyond belief. The heavenly spying left my guiltiness naked. In imagination I exaggerated the malice of the observing eyes as I had done with the drainpipe. If I desired to steal a few gooseberries I knew that God was watching, but I stole the gooseberries nevertheless and trembled in fear. I defied God and then prayed, 'Oh, God, let me off this time.' I dared God as I had dared the highest tree, but I felt that sometime he would strike at me a mortal blow. For God, too, was a wall, a barrier, a horizon that had to be surmounted.

Poor Alice, like myself, had the facility for constant sin allied to the torment of a sensitive, accusing mind. "God forgive me" she always prayed before, during, and after. She believed that thunder and lightning were tangible evidence of the wrath of God and taught me so at her knee. God talked to all the wicked with a tongue of searing flame. She felt that thus did God rebuke her, and she caused me to believe that some of the thunder and lightning was for me also. I remember a furious storm which burst over Riversdale, splitting and rocking the heavens and earth. The wind uprooted mighty pine trees and forks of lightning zig-zagged across the sky, searing bolts that photographed themselves perpetually upon my memory. Alice MacDonald took me on her knee and murmured a thousand times, "God forgive me."

"Will God forgive me, too, Big Mother?"

"Bless the bairn. What has God to forgive Albany for?"

"Stealing gooseberries."

The world rocked with the force of the heavenly barrage, huge raindrops splashed on the iron roof, beat upon the earth faster than they could be absorbed, as though a second day of judgment had come, and in fear "Big Mother" and the

"Puur Bairn" prayed Inside the house I was excited, hot, parched, as thirsty as a soul in hell Nothing dries one out so much as humid air and nervous excitement And there was no water in the house, although the torrents fell on the ground and the roof I was afraid to go beyond the door to the pump, terrified by the divine hysteria At last, during a lull, I ran with a cup but as I touched the pump handle God split the air over my head with a white hot searing, blinding bolt that made me cringe and cry and run in fear from the Almighty wrath I hid in the house and the all-seeing eye seemed harder to escape as I shut out everything else I hated and I was afraid of my hatred for I knew that there were no secrets of the mind And yet knowing that my mind was an open book to the universal accountant I attempted deception

An intense preoccupation with God hangs over those early years like a black cloud After my sin God always seemed on hand to judge me I visualized my puny self standing before Him while He frowned from His throne There must be a perverted thrill in such fear After God sent me crouching back from the pump handle I knew all the terror of Hell When the parson talked of Hell and its torments, I saw God guarding the drops in the pump from my parched tongue Happily in these days there is no place for a God who splits the heavens with lightning to terrorize the souls of children

Big Mother's fear of God was deepened through many an attempt at reformation When a Salvation Army Unit was established in Riversdale and a series of revivalist meetings in cottages were started, Sandy, ardent evangelist that he was, considered them as a means for the saving of Alice MacDonald from liquor Grandmother was easily persuaded, for she believed devoutly and never gave up hope of ultimately living a better life

'I would like to hold a meeting in the cottage, Alice'

"Very well It would be fine"

Preparations would be made A little more than could be afforded would be spent on the supper ingredients, Alice would bake and tidy My face would shine with soap and excitement. The small kitchen would be scrupulously cleaned



except for the brown tea stains on the wall paper Grandfather and the boys would be spruced up The kettle would be singing over a nice wood fire. Sandy would fuss around giving advice, mostly to me, so much that I would be alarmed in advance. And yet, all our preparations were only a parade of frugality, an opulence of the threadbare

"Don't talk. D'ye understand, laddie?"

"All right, grandfather."

"Don't fidget. D'ye understand, laddie?"

"All right, grandfather."

"Don't go to sleep. D'ye understand, laddie?"

"Yes, grandfather "

"Don't laugh. D'ye understand laddie?"

"Yes, grandfather."

"Shut your eyes when we pray D'ye understand, laddie?"

"Yes, grandfather."

"Stay in one seat D'ye understand, laddie?"

"Yes, grandfather."

"Don't take hold of the lassie's tambourine D'ye understand, laddie?"

"Yes, grandfather."

I would be frightened in advance by the spate of admonition. But Alice MacDonald, sure that my hands and face were clean, would comfort me

"Now be a good bairn and dinna be afraid."

"Yes, Big Mother."

There was a reassuring quality about her voice. She was as apprehensive as I was and soothed me to sooth her troubled self

We would sit in the kitchen prepared, listening to the ticking of the clock and to Sandy as he periodically cleared his throat. There would be a sound of feet outside, a knock on the door; everyone would jump up Sandy would fire a last shot at me in a subdued voice.

"Now remember, laddie."

"Yes, grandfather."

The door would be opened and amid all the handshaking I would be forgotten until the visitors had settled Then they would pat my head and ask my name.

"Albany Porcello," I would answer, hating to be patted on the head.

"Porcello," from the grown-ups. "Unusual name."

"My daughter Bella's bairn," Alice MacDonald would say.

The officer would brush my face with his moustache. The lassie would enfold me in an embrace that I liked. The uniforms interested me. In those days the dingy red and blue and gold seemed smart. And that prison garb for sour faces, the lassie's bonnet, seemed beautiful. I aspired to be a Salvationist and to wear a bonnet and a red jersey with gold lettering, and there were other attractions: the officer's concertina, the lassie's tambourine.

The services were most enjoyable. The Salvation Army hymns had a martial rhythm which instantly appealed to me. The lassie hammered holiness out of the tambourine with her elbows and her knuckles, and I was convinced that it was the greatest instrument on earth, far greater than even the concertina. Children love a measure of physical gymnastics in their music, and for days after each revival service, I would practise on a rusty tin plate, aspiring to be a tambourine virtuoso. The Salvationist would read a few verses from a pocket testament, a wonder of wonders, because he would read naturally, without drawing his r's. Everyone would grow happy, and the warm air would acquire the quality of good fellowship and infectious enthusiasm. Even the praying was good fun, for all present would assist to season the brew. "Hallelujah" "Praise the Lord." "Jesus Christ." "Lord the Father." Once in a period of unaccountable silence, when the breathing of the praying revivalist was arrested and no one uttered a beatific phrase, I fired a broadside into the midst of the gathering "Allelujah." I was overcome with consternation at my boldness, and through the chinks in my fingers, I saw Sandy frown. I trembled before the curried wrath. But the officer was a good fellow, not easily troubled, and able to turn tiny things to account. "Praise the Lord, at the voice of the child" I shot upward in the esteem of the assembly, and the story of my boldness was told for many a day. Still, I never essayed it again. One sound of my own voice was enough to cause self-

fright. However, that applause had helped me to swagger across the stage for a delicious moment.

As the service progressed, its note would change from joy to an appealing sombreness. The people would gird themselves to rout the King of Darkness.

"Who will give a testimony?" the officer would ask.

Sandy was full of courage. Like a courageous volunteer he would step forward, as from the ranks.

"Brother Stuart will testify. Come on, brother," from the officer.

"I have lived in the way of the Lord for many a year and the Lord has assisted me. I have tried to raise my children in God's light——" and so on.

He had a gift for forthright emphatic holiness. Rolling his r's and in a Scotch terminology that I have long since forgotten, he would continue.

And then one by one the assemblage would testify. There was a smugness about the way the possession of God's grace was taken for granted. Soon all would have testified except poor old Alice MacDonald, and she was the sole cause of the gathering. Her great sincerity made testimony most difficult. A painful silence would come and the hosts of the Lord would nerve themselves for the conquering onslaught. And yet the attack would be indirect. No one had the courage to look the old lady in the face squarely and say, "It's your turn. It's up to you."

"Oh, Lord, is there not another sister?" the officer would ask, as though making no personal reference. Big Mother would sit in mute and quivering agony, trying to make up her mind, for once she did all present would trample triumphantly on her exposed soul. The forces of Salvation would hammer at that frail bosom demanding surrender, demanding that self-abasement that is reputed to exalt. What resistance that frail Scottish breast offered! What a siege it was! No wonder Havelock held out at Lucknow!

"Oh, Lord, is there still an erring soul?"

Hymns would be sung; no longer the martial triumphant hymns that opened the meeting, but others calculated to conquer the sinner by persuasion. I wonder if I have the

words aright I heard them when I was five or six, and memory is generally tenacious with early hymns and nursery rhymes

*"Nay, but I yield, I yield,  
I can hold out no more,  
The dying thief rejoiced to yield,  
Love only conquers all"*

And dear old Big Mother, the most contrite heart among them all, had the greatest gift of humility And while the voices would run into another and another verse, her brows would knit, her lips would quiver and her shoulders stoop beneath the weight of her very great sin They would sing until the quivering inside was laid bare before the evangelical attack In the verbal contrition that was coming they would ascend to the supreme triumph of the night

*"I can hold out no more,  
The dying thief rejoiced to yield,  
Love only conquers all"*

"Oh, Lord, soften a heart"; and then a new hymn would come

*Tell me the old old story,  
That I may take it in,  
That wonderful redemption,  
God's remedy for sin"*

It was all tacitly understood that no one must ask her to surrender directly, for the surrender had to be an act of free will On, on, on the singing would go And troubled old Alice MacDonald would remain obdurate Slowly, the old lady's resolution would break down Then the Salvationist would season the bitterness of mortification with the hope of a great cleansing

*"Oh, I'm glad there is cleansing in the Saviour's blood,  
I'm glad there is cleansing in His blood."*

They would sweep to triumph as Big Mother faltered and suddenly sobbed aloud The demon was exorcized Across her quivering bosom they would all trample like swine Hesitantly Big Mother would confess her sins and, unlike the others, there was no certainty of pardon from a wrathful God in her utterance If humility erects the heavenly mansion she inhabits the grandest In those moments of despairing confession she would cling to me tightly, as to a lifebelt in a stormy sea, for it was given only to the five year old to understand that ache

‘I m a wicked, puir body’

Grandmother’s tears would set everyone else to weeping, they may even have evoked a sense of shame in some at the pitifulness of their triumph And Sandy who always wanted to see his wife humble herself before the altar of God and in the eyes of the neighbourhood, was yet the first to relent when the pound of flesh had been granted

‘There, there, Alice There, there, there Dinna weep now, lassie And tears would flow down into the old fellow’s beard ‘Let us ask the Lord to help you’

And then perhaps for the first time that night, prayer was a religious devotion and no longer a conventional exercise, for Alice MacDonald’s tears and humility exalted everyone I wonder if she, the pagan sinner, did not vicariously suffer and atone for all All would pray for her distressed and wounded soul, so limp when Satanic support had been with drawn Then happy, carefree hymns came once again, striking forward to fresh victories against the infidel

*“Onward, Christian soldiers,  
Marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus,  
Going on before”*

The lassie with her tambourine always made a collection Afterwards, Alice MacDonald handed round scones and cups of tea and saw that I was given the tastiest Maybe I would sit on the officer’s knee and recite the Lord’s Prayer with gusto. I liked that part It swelled me to importance,

and caused visitors to predict that my future would be religious and devotional.

Later, when Alice MacDonald put me to bed, she would be very much the gracious lady. She would stand over me muttering, "God help the puir bairn" A strange clairvoyance seemed to tell her that I, too, was a sinner.

In a few days God would be again neglected and Big Mother would be drunk on liquor instead of on holiness. The army of the Lord would be promising itself a fresh campaign.

Of such was the Kingdom of Heaven in our Riversdale home.

## **Good-bye Riversdale**

BEFORE I left Riversdale I had my first taste of school, and my school life, that ended most ingloriously, commenced brilliantly. The most triumphant day was the first, the most shameful, the last.

Ever since my uncles had discovered me to be a fireside prodigy they had continued their coaching I had been exhibited to strangers as if I were a cleverly trained dog, and the adulation which I had received had spurred me on to heroic efforts. I did not learn for the sake of learning, but to satisfy my ego And I was eager to get to school to show all the other children what a smart fellow I was. I remember my grandmother assuring the teacher that I was too bright to start in the bottom class All that persuasion puffed me up so that it is not easily forgotten. I can see Big Mother by the five-barred gate accosting the teacher on her way to school.

"You'll put the bairn on. He'll be a smart pupil."

"Yes," said the teacher, meaning "No."

She had been taken in by the bright child story before.

She placed me in the baby class where tots my own age were learning the alphabet. I was crushed, fretted at once

at this slight. It was a wonder I didn't collapse in tears. I was conscious that I was equal to the lesson that the best class in the room was doing. My emotional stress must have been unusual, for I remember all the details as I always do of events when I am under pressure. But I was soon thrilled, for I went up like a rocket, leaving a brilliant trail across the room. When the teacher failed to trap me with the alphabet, she promoted me a class. Spelling and reading were taken in the next class at once. I was the only pupil in it returning a clean slate. I read the lesson faultlessly, inwardly gloating because of my victory over the teacher. I was promoted again. I simply couldn't go wrong, for by this time I had the great stimulant to effort. I was nervous. Everyone in the classroom was interested and the intense emotional stress was calculated to get the best results out of me. Again I alone survived the black mark. The teacher became as excited as I. I was advanced to the top class in the room, and continued my proficiency.

So in my first day at school there I sat at the head of the room in proud supremacy. School was a great game, and I was the most skilful player.

Alas, I should have been promoted to the bottom place in the next room. What was essential was that I should be compelled to struggle to retain my place, for my brilliance was spasmodic, while my dreaminess was chronic. School became drudgery from the second day because I knew all the lessons. I had no stimulus for my mental energy. I was choked, left for months to stare at a book that had grown monotonous. My conceit turned to boredom.

"Albany will be a remarkable pupil," was the teacher's false prophecy. My success was a mere flash in the pan. I was never made for routine work where the pace is set by the average. School imprisoned my body, but before the end of the week, my soul was outside riding willow sticks. The danger of all education is that the pupil has a different individuality from the corporate individuality of the class. The bright and the dull, the dreamer and the casual, must progress in step, and classes are too large for teachers to know and understand children by more than outward appear-

ance The mind that leaps to conclusions must wait on the mind that plods, and when the quick mind falls asleep to wait, the plodder not infrequently forges ahead The supremacy of the class was fatally easy for me to retain Vigorous for fresh fields, I was caught in a maze of stultifying repetition I acquired a habit of makeshift indifference which helped me to ruin my school years The bottom of the class ahead would have spurred me on from the initial moment. I say I was proud of my place at the top So I was And yet it was not a conceit I wore on my sleeve It was an inward conceit Outwardly I was shy and really humble For I knew that my mother was poor and that I was an outlaw I knew there was speculation about my antecedents And I knew that all the village was aware of my grandmother's drinking The teacher was pretty, fresh, kind, attractive I liked her for herself, but she should have thrust me upward out of her room

Pocketed in a class where results came from knowledge acquired by the fireside rather than from industry, school lost its savour, so I went riding imaginative willow sticks The lithographed lions and tigers and crocodiles wandered off the wall into my day dreams Pictures of ships cleaving blue waters sailed on dashing real spray from their bows, as they sailed miraculously on into the teeth of mighty hurricanes Soldiers marched similarly into battle And when the ship sailed I stood on the bridge and when the soldiers fought, I was both the general and the bugler boy Sometimes the real as well as the imaginary allured me A bird's nest on the tall pine beyond the window, the sight of waving grass or tussock speckled with dandelion and musk made me feel a prisoner I allowed my mind freedom to wade in creeks and climb boughs Maybe only childish dreams and magic carpets on which children reach the beyond prevent school from putting infants to death

Within I learned a few important items I learned that the British Nation, thanks to St Andrew (for the pretty school teacher was Presbyterian), was the salt of the earth, and that Victoria was the world's greatest Queen by acreage of territory. Also, that British people inhabited every country



that was coloured red on the map Lesser peoples inhabited the countries coloured dingy green or brown or dirty yellow Years after, it was a shock to discover that Victoria was not a Presbyterian

"I'd rather live in a country painted red than a country painted brown "

I got that gem off too Red was much nicer A huge map hung by the fireplace in the schoolroom I knew that the deep blue was the rolling waves of mighty oceans I would imagine tossing row boats out on the mighty deep row boats that stretched from meridian to meridian row boats that made as large a showing as toy boats might upon a pond They moved with the mighty strokes of stern oarsmen from continent to continent, whales were crowded for room in the blue expanse The singing lessons too gave me some idea of the immensity of the seas but it seemed an immensity not insuperable to sturdy oarsmen On many a hot afternoon we sang our way into the unknown

*' Dip boys dip the oar  
Bid farewell to the dusky shore  
Freedom ours shall be  
As we cross the deep blue sea '*

As we sung that chorus I could always see the row boat leaving Africa and swinging itself in persistent spurts across the Atlantic to America I could see the set, determined jaw of rowers as the boat shot up and down the intervening waves Steadily the boat would win its way forward as we sang

*What though the dark rocks frown boys  
Our danger on the shore,  
When fairer lands appear, boys  
Our danger will be o'er*

*Dip boys dip the oar  
Bid farewell to the dusky shore  
Freedom ours shall be  
As we cross the deep blue sea*

These verses gave me an expanding sense of the vastness of the sea I would be able to feel the quality of space while

I still visualized an ocean spanned by a succession of sturdy strokes I toyed with the qualities though not the appearances of the map while other children progressed with their lessons In a rowing-boat I circumnavigated the globe, always with a crew which turned stern, frowning faces to the elements, and dared the furious, thrashing tails of whales I went from sea to sea, from ocean to ocean, from shelving tropical sand to arctic ice I landed on continents to say "Good day" to lion or man-eating tiger In fact, many lions and tigers did I meet voyaging around the school walls, and so deep an impression did they make on my mind that my sleep at times became almost alarming

We would break hurriedly from school on a hot afternoon and then dawdle homeward The road near the school was always heavy with the drowsy odour of pine needles A thousand grasshoppers in the shade would be shaking the air with their racket All children dawdle and all children are noisy We used to find a thousand noisy ways of doing nothing, a thousand somethings to do Fencing wire would creak as we swung on farmers fences Shrubs would be desecrated to provide switches Stones would be flung at birds We would paddle in muddy ditches, tell the time by blowing down off seeding dandelions, that make-believe method of astounding inaccuracy Tussock might be lighted with a stolen match, and the fire spread from tussock to tussock with a torch Spiteful names would be yelled at the unpopular There would be fighting laughter, chattering All the human family that lives in the country has dawdled home this way, although the privilege of lighting tussock existed only in New Zealand

The schoolmaster or Dominie was a dour, old-fashioned Scot who loved the sedate He was impatient with the chattering of loitering infants and the lack of respect in New Zealand paid to one of his calibre His duty was to teach children not expression, but repression Our noisy frolic on the way home used to very much upset his liver When we had spilled over the threshold we could not be sure whether we had passed beyond the exercise of his authority Whenever rowdy hearts disturbed the Dominie as he laboured with the

upper classes, we were in danger. Such chattering had to be suppressed. The Dominie would detail a few big boys to apprehend some of the culprits. Big boys are cruel and swift. We scampered off with protesting voices but in vain. Back we would be dragged, tearful victims. Our terror was a relish to the Dominie. His own classes smilingly approved.

One day I loitered, making much noise with the others. Three big boys shot out of school and I was among the lost. Each boy apprehended two culprits and we were trooped back, our captors regaling us with descriptions of the tattoo the Dominie would beat upon our backsides after he had lowered our breeks. We trooped in in tears.

So there you are, said the Dominie.

He sat us along the top of the desk with our feet dangling and continued with his interrupted lesson. And as the lesson proceeded he came to us and one at a time loosened our breeks from our braces while the big boys and girls tittered, grinned, and waited expectantly for the performance. With our breeks half way up and half way down and our sarls showing the Dominie continued his teaching. He gave us time to meditate upon our evil ways while he thundered against his own class and gave his r's an honest Presbyterian rattle. Every now and then he would threaten a dullard by nodding towards us and suggesting a like fate.

At last he selected one of us, a previous sinner, and placing him over his knee in full view of all the class, raised red welts upon his bottom. The victim wailed. The rest of us raised a sobbing clamour. The class grinned its appreciation and joy. The Dominie selected a second and a third and there was more weal and woe.

'Stop crying,' he counselled each as he discontinued threatening continuance otherwise.

'I'll stop.'

The eagerness was abject though the sobbing continued. He stayed his hand at three. He opened the door. He glared ferociously at us while we dangled our legs.

'You can go this time, but don't offend again. Now run.'

We ran, holding up our unbuttoned breeks with our hands.

In my excitement I let mine go and they fell around my ankles, tripping me up and exposing my bared backside to the ceiling and the laughter But it wasn't funny at the time It takes the passage of a few decades for one to appreciate such jokes I am sure I went out of that door with the velocity of a bullet, nor did I stop until I was nearly home I never loitered in the hot air of that avenue of pines again The Dominie must have been one of the last of his tribe, for I recall no other teacher who inflicted corporal punishment on the bare backside

My legs grew longer I went riding round the hills on Saturday on a grocer's cart, minding the horse while the grocer's boy delivered parcels I saw the snow-capped mountains of Queenstown from afar, miles of rolling hills covered with tussock or growing wheat and oats I went to a funeral, a gala experience, for there were full fifty buggies I grew less educated and more imaginative I lived a life as it was recorded in poetry

*' Up the rocky mountau,  
Down the rocky gleu,  
You daren't go a-hunting,  
For fear of little men  
Big folk, wee folk, trooping all together,  
Green Jacket, Red Cap, and White Owls Feather "*

I saw these little gentlemen I saw them in the midday haze and in the evening shadows Indeed, as other children with age become more matter of fact, I became more of a dreamer I saw the little gentlemen in the swamps with the wild fowl, dodging behind waving tussock, hiding in rustling flax They had peaked hats and peaked shoes and peaked faces, too They were in the pines, in the cress by the creek, in the mushroom and toadstool villages when I was asleep at night I saw them because it pleased me to see them, because it pleased Alice MacDonald to expound them Sprites, gnomes, fairies, Scotch songs at evening, were a narcotic to my poverty and to her accusing mind For I knew that at some time I must make acquaintanceship with hunger again I read books

of sorts, probably books of rhymes I could enjoy life because I could let myself go I could be Jack and the Giant Jack killed at the same time I could even be the goose that laid the golden eggs I could be the good and bad fairy and the victim

And if I saw all this shadow population, I was not completely shut out from the beauty around me I marvelled the more at the explosion of hot broom pods in the summer's heat I still sat out with Alice MacDonald to enjoy the sentimental heartache of twilight I knew the thrill of physical movement as my skinny legs galloped me away from school Riversdale was a happy place—a happiness shared with bird and beast and flower and bud tall pines and concrete pipe Sandy erupted his Indian condiments periodically and Big Mother got drunk periodically The Salvationists came again and again to exorcise the demon and the demon re-entered as the Salvationists left Except when drunkenness intervened few clouds obscured the sky

In a night Riversdale fell to pieces My grandmother had a prolonged bout in which she traded too many of the poor household effects for liquor She even bought groceries *on credit to sell again for the accursed fluid* Heavily encumbered, the family lost all hope My uncles packed and left for other spheres Sandy in a fit of wanderlust and hopeless of retrieving his fortunes in Riversdale, departed in a hurry for Dunedin, leaving Big Mother and myself to break up the home and follow The goods and chattels that were to be sold to pay our fares were given away for liquor Things would have gone badly for me except for the attention of some neighbours For weeks I lived alone in the house with a drunken sot, weeks I but dimly remember How I hated liquor! One day tickets arrived It is well that the money had not been sent My grandmother was going to a new home to be got together by Sandy I was going back to my mother and brother and sister

'Puir Bairn, Puir Bairn, Alice MacDonald had to say to me again and again Puir Bairn, I might a been a better grandmother to you'

"You have been a good Big Mother."

Rivers and hills and green fields rushed at me and fell away as the train sped. I had no regrets at departure. The experiences of the final weeks had made Riversdale hateful. Also, all children love the kaleidoscopic novelty of swift movement. Hills, plains, fields, hedges, trees, rivers, tunnels, bridges, ham sandwiches are all on the way. And this time. I remember the miles instead of the milestones, for I can neither remember departure from Riversdale nor arrival in Dunedin. Maybe the mind can only absorb a given number of imprints in one day. I ran from Riversdale to Dunedin from sunlight to fog, from infancy to boyhood, from a drunken grandmother to a poor drudge of an overworked mother.

## PART FOUR

### Poverty's shame

THE novelty of a city must have been confusing. For while I still retain brilliantly clear impressions of rural simplicities—hurrying landscapes from the train window, of sheaf stacks, houses, plantations, rivers, lakes, hills springing up in front and hastening rearward as the train hammered along the rails—I fail to retain clear impressions of my return to Dunedin. The town must have overwhelmed the faculty which registers. And perhaps, also, with outward impressions as with internal experience, the country is so humdrum that novelty is easily recalled, and incidents stand far apart like landmarks, whereas, in the city, before one experience is well recorded and clarified another is trampling to produce a chaos of sensations. My farewell to Riversdale is at least remembered. My arrival in Dunedin is completely forgotten.

Somewhere, and for many years, I said good-bye to Alice MacDonald. Somehow I became a member of my mother's household with my brother and sister. I cannot remember the act of union. When memory runs clear again all this has long since taken place. The first thing I recall is a keen awareness of a quality rather than a visible object or an event. I am aware of poor clothes, of poor food. I see a difference between ours and other families. We are outcasts. The city medley overwhelms my mind but my stomach registers the simple fact of hunger. Shame averts its eyes before the assessment of a discerning neighbourhood.

Then comes a picture of my sister my brother and I on our way to school It is the first time I see her She swings her school bag She is dark eyed, dark haired, a beautiful but poorly dressed girl Perhaps I am incorrect Maybe it is that love and the years make her seem beautiful She is showing me a two decker pencil case she had been given by someone Heaven knows the source of this incredible opulence My brother is an unimportant infant chubby despite poverty and as conventional in appearance as I am foreign , conventional in that he failed to excite comment whereas Rose and I suggest we are what we are—social outcasts

My first recollection of the school deals with poverty The Boer War was in progress All the children were to receive silk badges overprinted with heroes not ranker heroes but Field Marshals, ie Press Heroes We were warned on the previous afternoon to be sure to be n attendance It was our misfortune that mother could not afford a clock We were constantly late for school and we were as constantly punished for being late Apart from the striking of the Town Clock, which as often as not failed to reach our drowsy ears getting up was guesswork We were invariably late for school

Lateness at school was one of the prices we paid for being penurious We were late the morning silk badges were given out When I arrived every child in the class had the silk badge of a Hero pinned to its breast But I was too poor to be permitted to enter the temple of patriotism and flaunt my loyalty To be patriotic one must needs have at least a German alarm clock

"Late again? "

"Yes, Miss "

"Go to your place There is no badge for being late "

Without a badge I was naked Every eye in the room was witness to my ignominy Blessed are the poor for they shall be made to squirm

There is another memory relating to the Boer War On the corner by the school there was a store and the big boys and girls used to whisper "Pro Boer" and spit on the pavement as they passed We used to imitate the big boys But the Pro-Boer held his trade Probably he combated hostility



by reducing his prices Cheapness is a greater God than loyalty, and seduces adults, so that infantile backsliding was excusable I blundered in his shop once for half a penn'orth of slate pencils and displayed such earnestness before a bottle of sweets that he gave me a few After that, I secretly cherished an idea that a 'Pro Boer' wasn't such a bad fellow, but I still spat on the pavement Liking a Pro Boer, as well as poverty, was something to be ashamed of A handful of sweets has great persuasive power with a hungry infant Not only boys change their religion in order to participate in a distribution of loaves and fishes

We lived in a New World slum a two roomed shack down a narrow lane We all slept in the one room, Rose and mother in a double bed, my brother and I in a single It was fortunate that the beds crowded the small room, for we had no other bedroom furniture The kitchen contained a table a sofa, two rickety chairs, and the floor was bare The rent was paid in part by a semi-state benevolent institution, which sent an occasional woman visitor to make sure we were not living riotously She made indiscreet inquiries among the neighbours, who were, thus, always our censors But however pitiful the reports, the aid was still forthcoming after mother had been suitably rebuked It was probably cheaper to starve us in our home than feed and clothe us in a state institution

My mother was dark, small, slenderly built, and slightly hard of hearing Once in a fit of drunkenness Alice MacDonald had struck her a blow across the head and from that moment a state of developing deafness had set in, gradually shutting her off from verbal communion with her children At this time mother worked out as a seamstress, going to work after she had got us all off to school, and returning home late at night Work, then not very plentiful, was given to her largely by the charitably disposed The wages were meagre, the hours were poorly defined, but there were compensations Late at night mother would come home with a scrag end of meat, a pie dish half full of sago pudding, or the remains of a leg of mutton, a cold chop or a sausage or two, a jug of soup, stale scones or cakes, a fragment of this or a portion of that, all wrapped in newspaper and carried in a Maori kit.

Food which would otherwise have entered the refuse tin. Our eyes would shine at the unwrapping. We were like so many hungry fledglings in a nest chirping over a diet of worms, and we would clean up even the bones. Such nights, when the kitchens of the great yielded change from our own meagre and monotonous diet, were gala nights. We had a phrase, the truth of which we sincerely believed, because faith aided mastication, a phrase which is contrary to my present belief: "The nearer the bone the sweeter the meat." Since much of the meat was too close to the bone to permit polite table manners, we justified our gustatory methods by yet another phrase: "Fingers were made before forks." Our table manners and habits were determined by economic considerations rather than by the rules of polite society.

Mother's employers were always gracious in regard to unwanted left-overs. It satisfied their magnanimity to know that the fragments that would otherwise decorate the swill tub, gave us joy and sustenance. But mother's employers were not so generous in the wage they allotted her. People who help others out of pity seem to be able to drive hard bargains. Most of our clothing came similarly. Coats, trousers, dresses worn threadbare, were handed on, and mother remade them to fit. But at that time that fact gave us no concern.

From the moment I remember our mother, I perceive her work and her deafness driving us apart. There is no worse barrier in the world than deafness, behind which folk at last become bitter and distrustful. She loved us all, but the very degree of her sacrifice doomed the sacrifice to failure, for while she was away earning money and cast-offs and left-overs, we were running wild upon the streets and acquiring vicious habits. And the growing deafness made it possible for us to suggest verbal deceit to one another behind mother's back, and there was no free communion that would have enabled her to understand our thoughts. She had no part in our mental life, and was merely the provider of food, clothing and shelter.

Mother's prospects must have been hopelessly bleak, for we and our appetites and our physical capacity to wear out clothing expanded. Yet she battled on with a desperate

tenacity I think long usage had accustomed her to believe that poverty was the lot to which God had called her for she retained her faith in God and in organized religion Perhaps she fought for the day when her grown up children would bring grist to the mill If that faith sustained her she was doomed to pitiful disillusion across the years although on a day when it was finally dead there came a miraculous resurrection Children brought up as we were could only bring trouble to the home although indeed my brother managed to bring honour of sorts Like most of the very poor mother was extremely patriotic and knew a good deal about the Royal Family from an assiduous reading of all the loyal details wherever she found them in print A King a Queen, a Royal Family and an array of Dukes and Duchesses can be a great narcotic to the sufferings of humble subjects Mother voted Conservative at elections because she could not do without the rich Rich were essential that we might have left overs and cast offs Despite her harsh drudgery she had a passionate love of reading and a lively imagination existed behind that growing wall of deafness Books must have made life livable, the type of cheap romance that celebrated the triumph of honest love and industry over all obstacles, not excluding poverty, the type of books that gave the villain the axe in the last chapter

Douglas was still as plump as I was thin and defied the lack of nutrition to reduce his chubbiness He must have come from a long line of superlative starvers If he had been given a better start in life he would have become tremendously wealthy for he was acquisitive whereas I was spendthrift Possessed of an easily roused and easily quenched temper it seemed that his only inherited trait was Sandy's Cayenne

Rose was a striking girl in the Southern community similar in appearance to myself except that she was rounder and fresher Slender and lively she was not clever at school because of a lack of application and the possession of other interests She was a trifle deceitful and in her judgments at times as hard on my mother as conventional society Running round the streets she became inured to the wickedness of the world too early Like all daughters of the poor, she

was much sought after by doubtful young men and elderly youths Her self willed state was the result of her environment She never had a chance She was selling herself to give us happy hours before many years were past She was a flower of the gutter that bloomed for a short time and was then contaminated, besmirched, killed

When there was no work or left overs for mother, we lived on bread and the salty third grade butter permitted by the benevolent society Now and again we had three pennorth of mince meat and a few potatoes Mince meat stew is easy to expand in quantity with a turn of the tap and an additional pinch of salt Generally we had in the house a large tin of black treacle which sufficed to cover the bread when the rancid butter of the benevolent society was inedible Charity must taste bitter to prevent aspiration

Yes We were poor.

## Our Happy Christmas

CHRISTMAS used to come but once a year too often Sometimes poverty is less endurable and most cruel in its deprivation Such a time was Christmas Eve The excess of rejoicing in neighbourhood homes creates an excess of gloom where the table has no dainty When poverty only starves the body it is bad enough, when it shames the mind it is worse

I remember one Christmas because it was our worst An epidemic of scarlet fever had been raging in Dunedin, and everyone in the house had been stricken Mother had been isolated by our illness lest she take the disease to the homes and children of the great, and hence was unable to go to work We had been resisting the disease on bread and treacle and milkless tea, with a mince meat stew as a special treat on Sundays Worry and illness—for mother had not been immune—had undermined her health and spirits

How poor people struggle through such periods with the home intact is one of those modern miracles which we find it

convenient not to probe. We had all been down with fever. There had been no outside aid for us. The only income was the chit from the benevolent society for bare necessities. The rent was in arrears, and the landlord was only avoiding us because of the infection from which we suffered. Probably he also knew that the rent would be paid in time though we were forced to exist on dry bread. The day before Christmas my mother went with me to a timber yard to gather a few scattered chips, because we had not got a stick with which to boil the kettle. As we needed much in our state of health, so was our plight desperate. We were up and about with the skin peeling off us in parchment-like sheets as it does after scarlet fever. And in the streets the neighbouring children were talking of what Santa Claus had for them. Shop windows were full of good things to eat and toys to play with. Rose and I moved around with our noses glued to the shop windows and our ears alert for the comment of other children. Everyone was assured of presents to come. Rose listened, and the hard core in her showed itself.

"Why are we not to get presents?"

"Mother hasn't got any money," I answered.

"Why hasn't mother got any money?"

"Because we are poor."

"I'm going to hang my stocking up to-night."

The threat shocked me profoundly. Without knowing why we were different from other children, I knew that our poverty was not mother's fault. I knew that fever had defeated her efforts to procure food, clothing, medicine, and rent, and I sensed the cruelty of leaving an empty stocking dangling in front of her nose to taunt her with her failure. As I shared her crusts in our battle with adversity, I came in that moment to share her mental and emotional battle.

"Don't do that. Mother will cry."

"I will! I will! I will! I will!" Rose was stubborn.

"But mother hasn't got a penny."

"She should have. Other mothers have."

"She should have. Other mothers have." I can hear those stubborn, unrelenting words ringing in my ears, the cry of the denied.

"But mother can't help it"

"I will hang it up I will! I will! I will!"

There was no dissuading Rose. She was not wittingly cruel, but merely young, thoughtless, normal, hungry for a moment of brightness and the joy of proprietorship of some trifle. She did not sense the cruelty of her threat as I did. Douglas was too small to understand. Rose was a little too hard at the core to understand. I was appalled at the thought of the challenge that stocking would constitute.

"You will make mother cry."

"I don't care! I don't care! I don't care!"

"I don't want mother to cry."

"Well, why hasn't she got something to put in our stockings?"

"Please don't hang it up."

"I will! I will! I will! So I will!"

"It's not mother's fault. Mother has been ill."

"Other boys and girls are going to get toys."

Maybe my own sensitiveness exaggerated the concern of mother as she went about the house on that Christmas Eve. I seemed to know all that she was thinking about, and in my boyish way I was full of pity. Rose had pity for only one at a time, that one herself. Mother seemed to avoid our eyes in self-accusation. She was ashamed because she had failed to supply us with some token of her affection. I think she would have committed her body and soul to eternal flame to have given us some measure of Christmas cheer. But who wanted a body blotched with fever? All she could do was to sigh over our bleak poverty. Poverty gives one plenty of time for its contemplation. Perhaps it is fortunate that in our Southern lands Christmas comes in midsummer and the poor are at least free from the violence of ice, snow, and cutting wind. I would have sold my own soul that night to have kept her free from the sight of that dangling, empty stocking. But Rose did not understand as I did.

"Please, Rose, don't hang up your stocking."

"Other mothers have money."

Other mothers have money. Thus was mother assessed and

despised The stocking was a much darned, cast off black one and washed probably until its tinge was green Rose hung it at the end of the bed Its pitiful emptiness the challenge it represented to my mother, wounded me as children are rarely wounded But there was a fierce despairing assertiveness about Rose that forbade my tearing it down Rose acted as if, by a brutal challenge, she could force tribute into that flimsy receptacle Poor Rose, she was hungry for good cheer In my time I was to hurt my mother more severely and more often than any member of the family, but my wounds were the result of unguarded impulses that inflicted self-hurt as well I never wounded with such brutal deliberativeness as Rose exercised that night I could not go to sleep thinking of that stocking and of mother's despair when she found it

When my mother came to the room and saw that stocking hanging on the bed it drove her back to the kitchen again and I knew why she had retired so I jumped out of bed and followed her She was sitting by the fireless stove crying, and when I went to comfort her and tell her I did not want any present, I believe my impulse hurt her more, far more than the empty stocking For she was a failure Rose had gone to sleep We sat together for a long time thinking of that stocking before I went back to bed I tried to imagine incredible things, a knock on the door, a parcel arriving for all But fancy never filled any stocking except in the story books I retired to bed and prayed as I lay on the pillow, prayed for that aid never vouchsafed One such miracle and what an evangelist would have been born in me "Oh God, help my mother Oh God, help my mother" Frantically I repeated the prayer numberless times, hoping that my reiteration might pierce that heavenly breast That stupid little prayer which made God a real father rather than an impassive, stony hearted recorder<sup>1</sup> But I lacked the graces of celestial persuasion In the morning the miserable stocking was still empty at the foot of the bed And I was the greatest sinner, for I was annoyed with God whereas Rose was merely wrathful towards my mother Rose was a flint hard, cold cruel Yet she was wet-eyed

"Mother should have given us something "

"But mother had nothing to give "

"She should have got something."

On Christmas morning we wandered in the neighbourhood. All the children flourished toy after toy. We envied their luck, and were appreciative, I extravagantly so, Rose soberly. We were questioned. I grew dumb, embarrassed at being forced to parade our poverty. But Rose, a skilled dissembler, was brazen. Her loyalty was as magnificent as her barbarism had been awful the night before. She was such a hard-fronted little liar that I was proud.

"I've got a set of cups and saucers and a doll that sleeps."

"Why don't you bring them out and show us?"

"Mother won't let us."

And how I nodded!

"We're going to have plum pudding for dinner."

My head never stopped nodding

"And we've got a cake for tea with a 'Happy Christmas' on it."

I must nearly have shaken my head off.

Rose's deceit was a stroke of genius tending to make life livable, and bridge our shame. Who are more proud than the poor?

"But mother *should* have had something for our stockings."

We went home from our verbal triumphs, to a Christmas meal of bread and black treacle. There was a pound of well-watered mince meat and an onion stewing in the pot for tea. Maybe we enjoyed our evening meal better than many a cloyed palate enjoyed heavy suet pudding.

In due course Douglas, too small and young to be either a reasonably good liar or skilled at silence, let the truth out. Then our humiliation was multiplied by ridicule. We were not only criminally poor; we were also shameless liars, targets for opprobrium. Verily pride goes before a paralysing fall.

For nights after Christmas our home was at a crisis, and I prayed myself to sleep.

"Oh, God, help my mother! Oh, God, help my mother!"

But the ears of heaven were purposely deaf. Subsequent events may illuminate how poverty was defeated, the rent paid, the home kept going while disease erected a barrier between



us and left-overs and cast-offs. And it is this event which has ever since made me doubtful, although carefree, about my own origin.

## The Answer to Prayer

SOME months after this period of desperate poverty something occurred of which I did not then sense the significance. My mother, very much worried, started to make a few baby clothes out of poor scraps and odds of red flannel. One day she took me into her confidence.

"You are going to have a baby brother or a baby sister."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"Where is it coming from?"

"I don't know. You came out of a haystack."

I marvelled at the miracle that was to be and went on my way in silent ignorance, blissfully unaware that a certain series of physical relationships were necessary to produce the birth of a brother or sister. My sister, whose knowledge of sex must have been profound at a tender age, knew what factors contributed to such an event, but she did not tell me. Daughters of the poor who loiter in the gutters because the gutter lamp is brighter than the home, learn such things early in life and to their disadvantage.

For physical reasons unknown to me, mother had to surrender her work for a few weeks when she most needed the money. Even if mentally willing and physically able to continue work, my mother had reached that state not infrequently termed "disgraceful." For it seems to be understood that women should not parade their pregnancy. Alas, the poor cannot afford the luxury of this exquisite sensitiveness. The urge of the stomach knows few conventions. Mother was probably willing to work, but rich and charitable ladies possibly thought her appearance indecent. So she came home to hunger. We eked out existence on benevolent chits, starving the unborn infant. No wonder we were all born with the

knowledge of poverty the pre natal environment must have been of deprivation The mystery of the coming birth filled all our hearts with wondrous anticipation

Thinking back, I could cry at the plight of my mother Her life was a grey one with few gleams of pleasure Morality is so easy when one resides amid plenty, that is, conventional morality, which frequently is only scientific avoidance of consequences "Be sure your sin will find you out," was written by the mighty for the very poor I think of our pitiful struggle when all of us were stricken with disease I see my mother selling herself to keep us clothed and fed and to pay the rent Does it matter what society's verdict was? What else was the drudge to do? The consequences of her plight must have been heartbreaking She had to face the scorn and jeers of neighbours She had to explain to her other brats that an infant was to be born

A woman came to live with us in our two room hovel, and slept on the kitchen sofa Two nights after she came Rose and I were sent out for a walk We walked for a couple of hours Rose knew all about what was going to happen and the physiological reasons Rose asked me to pause and listen outside on our return She was expectant

"I heard a cat mewling," I said

"Silly," said Rose "It's a baby "

"Whose baby?"

"Mother's baby "

And there it was when we went in, a poor little unwanted sister Mother was about in a couple of days Our poverty drew us closer to our baby sister If we had nothing else we had her as a source of delight But mother was distressed to find food for all of us She sent me with a note to a baker, requesting that he come and see her Reading it, he grew very concerned. Years passed before I understood his concern.

"You haven't shown anyone this note "

"No, I have not "

"You haven't read it."

"No."

"Here, take this home I will come and see your mother to-night."

He gave me four half crowns, two loaves of fresh bread and a cake I was staggered at the effect of the note I had read it and it only asked him to call Right at that moment I performed the rottenest act of my life Have mercy upon me! I was young and impulsive I was tired of the eternal monotony of bread and treacle from the benevolent society I put one of those half-crowns in my trouser pocket When I took the bread and money home, I said nothing about that half crown It was thirty pieces of copper for the betrayal of my sister I spent the money in a vulgar gorge, a gorge at the expense of a distraught mother and a cradled child Time the healer, does not wipe away that stain I am still ashamed At the moment, I was dazzled by the glittering splendour of that coin

‘He says he’ll come to night’

My mother was surprised at the money, which was unexpected, but she was outraged that the baker had not left his cart by the kerbside to come at once That night and on other nights the baker did come One night he came with his wife A note from my mother had fallen into her hands, and she insisted on coming to rebuke the baker and mother simultaneously He came, a shame faced, apologetic culprit, to confess his sin in the presence of his partner in ill doing The scene was hysterical with heated, screaming reprobations We were all frightened Mother picked up an axe and I thought she was going to split the baker’s head And he stood fearful, and yet trying to laugh the anger of two women aside I could not understand all the queer tangle about the baker and our baby sister, except that in some mysterious way the baker was partly responsible for the child in the cradle

I was proud of our wee mite of a sister; too innocent to see the brand of shame, I saw only a child All I knew was human love, even if I had stolen thirty pence I was enraptured by tiny hands and tiny feet At once she was the wonder baby Our very poverty made her appreciated We had no other toy I did not know that all the neighbours were shaking their heads over our sinful plight The trouble was that the little child was as lovely as any ever born in wedlock Nature is scornful of convention. I took to boasting, as though in our

home were the only baby in Dunedin I ignored mother's admonition to tell no one, her effort to protect us by counselling secrecy was an unaccountable prohibition The baby was a glorious being requiring loud boasting To have a baby and be silent was preposterous

"If you promise not to tell, I'll tell you a secret "

"I won't tell "

"We have a baby sister in our house, and it has such tiny hands and feet and wee finger nails "

No one seemed greatly moved by my secret

'So have we " A boy robbed my announcement of novelty

"What did it come out of?" asked another

"I don't know I came out of a haystack "

'No it didn't," said a precocious boy "All babies come out of the inside of their mothers "

Actually I think his statement was a little more crude than that, containing actual details To me, the information seemed awful, to most of us unbelievable So much prettiness could not erupt into the world through a channel that our primitive minds associated only with grubbiness But I remained ignorant as to the attributes of sex long after the average boy My interest in books, which was to develop my imagination freed me from that preoccupation with the physical details of the body that bothers many dullards Already I was a long way behind many of the boys in this sort of knowledge

"It didn't," I affirmed

Most of the other boys were doubtful and the assertive boy could offer little proof except adult hearsay Questioned he had to admit he had never seen such an occurrence and he was one of a family of four He had merely been told so by other boys

A big boy heard about my sister and approached me a few weeks after her birth

"You haven't got a father, have you?"

"No He's dead "

"But you can't have a baby without a father "

"But we have got a baby "

"Your mother has got a baby?"

"Yes."

"Well, if a baby has no father the baby's a bastard"

"She isn't" I didn't know what a bastard was except that it was something awful, for sometimes boys used the word in swearing

"She must be"

'What's a bastard, anyhow?'

The boy tried to explain, but I could not understand All I knew was that he was trying to belittle my sister. I knew that I must keep quiet to defend her I loved that baby I hope my love may tell on the credit side against the half-crown I stole Debits and credits, poor souls that we are, striking a balance is not easy

The Sunday following that conversation, the boy came to me again at the Sunday School and took me aside with triumph in his face. How well I remember, for the incident threw me into an internal chaos

"I want to show you a verse in the Bible"

"What verse?"

Some boys knew every smutty verse

"Look."

I looked and read

"A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord"

"What does that mean?"

"It means that your sister will go to Hell"

The poignancy of that discovery pierced me to the heart My little sister had to go to Hell What had she done? Was there no escape? The thought of her terrible fate stunned me Hell was very real I saw its flames torturing her, licking around the tiny, protesting hands and feet. From then on, the sense of inescapable Hell-fire for the baby hung over my head I told no one else It was something terrible, necessitating concealment I ceased boasting about the tiny beauty of my little sister, but I loved her the more So utterly damned was she that my compassion was stirred to the depths I hated God for His vengefulness and was fearful for His hatred I went to the Bible to stare at the fatal words, but they could not be dissolved There they were in black print in the book that was

the fountain of all truth. "A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord." That was terribly clear. But just what a bastard was was not at all so well defined.

## Death of a bastard

BUT more than the kingdom of heaven refused admission to our sister. She secured but precarious footing upon the kingdom of earth. The chill wind of poverty destroyed this tiny soul. In a few months she was dead. We lavished our kindness upon her, but there was not much material sustenance. Hell-fire, lying in wait, refused to be denied its prize. The searing flame hungered for that little body born in sin. I used to turn up that injunction and stare blankly at it through tears. I must have been less holy than its author, for I wanted to get the little one past it into heaven. Across her path I always saw the barrier of those inexorable words. I could steal half a crown, but I could cry for her condemnation to Hell. I prayed full many a time for dispensation from that heavenly law.

"Oh, God, don't send my little sister to Hell."

BUT I knew that she was beyond salvation. Every Sunday the inspired truth of the Bible was emphasized. I never told my sister of my terrible discovery. I merely caressed a baby cheek and prayed, prayed with the knowledge of prior defeat.

"Please, God, don't send my little sister to Hell."

Outcast to heaven and earth, I loved her the more. That awful sentence made her need my love. I avoided my informant. God and the world were against us, and the pity for the baby and the hatred for God grew. I was afraid of my love because of God. I was afraid, but I loved notwithstanding. My imagination tore me asunder.

"Oh, please, God, don't send my baby sister to Hell."

I suppose that when she died we should have thrown our hats in the air, but the unwanted little mite had become almost everything to us. She was a human interest amid our common poverty. My brother spent many an hour crooning over her

in infant baby language He was directing her prattling into understandable phrase when she died

"Baby's dead"

Immediately across my mind in glowing, living, red hot letters I saw those words "A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord" I crept away to cry in loneliness

They put the little corpse in a coffin in the bedroom The coffin and the plot of ground for burial were paid for by the benevolent society Her small, white, waxy face seemed so pure beside the deep black of the coffin A dozen times I sneaked alone into the room to look upon that face, and a dozen times I knelt down by the bedside and cried and silently prayed

"Oh, God don't send my little sister to Hell"

I sobbed aloud with grief and fear They came and led me away, and I went back again and again and prayed and sobbed at sight of that waxy purity that was condemned for its sin I defeated the vigilance until those present were concerned and afraid lest I break down And until this day of writing I have never told anyone why I sobbed and feared.

I saw in my mind a personal, malicious devil waiting with a cruel trident for her body Hell, astonishingly like the open furnace of a nearby iron foundry, yawned and belched its awful tongue of consuming flame And I knew that the flame would caress that body to life and an "eternity of writhing pain" For months that vision recurred What a queer world we live in!

She was buried in a pauper's plot in the most convenient cemetery, and the benevolent society reimbursed the undertaker The coffin, on even a time payment basis, must have been beyond our means Once or twice we ventured to the grave, but there was no stone to mark the location Heavy winter rains sank the earth until the grave became a gaping vent Grass and weeds and herbs encroached until the identity of the plot was lost in the tangle of growth We ceased to go But for a long time I prayed, "Oh, God, please let my sister out of Hell." Time brought the belief that nobody is seared in Hell to satisfy an archaic mandate But for many a year I

knew her for an outcast from heaven and I feared God because, sinfully, I still loved her memory.

Baby's death did not free us from all the economic worry of her birth. For a long time we had another worry. Early in the morning every few days there came a tapping on the door. Someone would go. It would be the son of the woman who had assisted my mother at her confinement.

"Please, mother wants to know if you will give her a few shillings."

Shilling by shilling the debt was liquidated. We ate a little less. Sometimes when there was nothing in the purse we would play possum, and go about whispering to one another until the knocking stopped and the footsteps died away up the lane. "S-sH. He wants money," mother would caution. He would return again as remorseless as any debt collector.

Tap! tap! tap! tap! There was no avoidance of such persistence.

"Please, can mother have some money?"

"Tell mother we're hard up."

Shilling by shilling, sometimes a sixpence or a threepenny bit, the debt was reduced.

Baby's death must have been a merciful release to mother, for her presence chained mother to the home and mere charity. When the baby died, mother went back to her task of supplementing benevolent society aid with work and cast-offs and left-overs. But mother found consolation in an inscription in a birthday book she had come by. She read us the printed inscription opposite the death day of our sister.

"When beggars die, no comets are seen."

That year there had been a brilliant comet in the twilight sky. I was too young to remember its name. Night after night it shone in the sky like a silver cross. Night after night we would look at it and mother would murmur superstitiously.

"When beggars die, no comets are seen."

But I knew better. There were letters of fire across the sky that were known only to myself, letters that made fun of comets and birthday books. Baby was in Hell.



## Save your money and buy a clock

"PLEASE, Mr. Mason, will you tell mother the time?"

"Tell your mother to save her money and buy a clock."

The lack of a timepiece played havoc with our early schooling. Getting up and going to school was so very much a matter of guess-work with us when mother's gold watch—God knows where she had acquired it—was in pawn. We came to time our getting up by the sounding of Dunedin's factory whistles. If we were drowsy on a bitter morning, or if the wind was the wrong way, or if the rain was pattering against the iron roof, we would surely fail to hear and be late for school. Many years passed by before we could afford to buy a cheap German alarm clock.

"Please, Mr. Mason, what is the time?"

"Half-past eight, but my clock is fast."

He would never tell us how fast his clock was. And we could never compel him to. Just as the poor wear inferior trousers, so we were forced to put up with time of doubtful quality. "Never look a gift horse in the mouth." He would leave us to guess and "Shoo" us out of his shop as though we were so much poultry. I passed his closed and tumble-down shop some years ago and was told he was a miserable old recluse awaiting the coffin. I believed the miserable part perhaps too easily. My mind was biased. After all, we must have plagued him beyond endurance with our repeated requests. Children easily acquire prejudices.

"Please, Mr. Mason, will you tell mother the time?"

"The clock's stopped."

We knew that he owned a big fat watch, but we had to retire defeated when the clock was stopped, for the dial of the watch was kept to inform his private eyes and not to satisfy the curiosity of paupers. He appeared to exult when he had forgotten to wind up the clock so that we would stand crestfallen upon his threshold. We would wait at the head of the lane

accosting the passers by until some person with a watch and goodwill made us a present of the information But Mason—he always made me feel guilty of theft

“Please, Mr Mason, will you——”

“Tell mother the time,” he would snatch the phrase out of our lips with a ponderous knowingness

“Yes, please, Mr Mason ”

“Tell your mother to save her money and buy a clock ”

We would flinch and squirm from restless foot to restless foot and wait in patience until at last he would condescend

When we had a tiny errand to buy from him, he would serve us and then, anticipating the request, he would say, “That will be tuppence and the time is half-past eight ”

“Please, Mr Mason, will you tell mother the time?”

“Do you want to wear my clock out?”

“No, Mr. Mason ”

How our guilt of penury made us cringe

The teacher grew to expect us to be late Entering the room each morning was an ordeal

“Late again?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“What excuse?”

“The clock stopped,” once I said

“Hold out your hand,” the teacher would say

I would go to my place most mornings in the week with my hand stinging from the blows of the leather, deservedly tanned for being so criminally poor as not to have a clock And there is something just about it all If only adults were tanned regularly for being poor.

At playtime a boy challenged me with a grin on his face

“You haven’t got a clock ”

“How do you know?” I questioned

“Save your money and buy a clock ” The boy had heard Mason.

I dropped my lying excuse after that experience I would rather be flayed than laughed at. Old Mason told all his customers about our annoying habit No doubt they listened sympathetically and murmured, “Too bad Too bad Not nice people to have in the neighbourhood.”

I did fairly well at school, but my late attendance gave the teacher a reasonable grudge against me. And I suppose my clothes were poor and well patched, ill fitting, and half the time my feet were bare. Clothes are not the man, but lack of them handicaps any member of the human family. Soon, when I was late, I was solving the problem by staying away from school altogether. I found that solution so attractive that I improved upon it and stayed away when I was not late. And then afraid of punishment for staying away, I was launched upon a regular truancy. Rose and I made the decision and we carried Douglas away with us. He was a practical child and liked school, but we overruled his protests. Soon we were all so conscious of our guilt that fear silenced any protest.

Douglas and I played truant together. My sister Rose went away on her own, meeting us at the end of the day. Our pastimes were not hers. We paddled around the bay. Where did she go? What allurements led her away?

We never paused to ask her where. She was the oldest. She would come home sometimes with a bag of sweets, a few bananas. She was pretty, a child, with no sense yet of the real economic value of her prettiness. While she should have been in school she was stepping it out more merrily than her brothers on the road to Hell. For there was no physical disability about the truancy of Douglas and myself. Our disability was purely scholastic. We exercised our bodies healthfully around Dunedin's many bays. The bays had a wealth of marine life, were inexhaustible playgrounds except when it rained. We caught eels, gathered cockles down the harbour, found young octopuses stranded in the black mud by the receding tide, waded, splashed, paddled around on boards. One day the truant inspector took a hand when he sighted us playing around the bays. We were apprehended and very tearfully conducted back to our school, back to the offices of the headmaster. For an hour we stood in his office with our noses to the wall while our mother, at home that day, was sent for.

Mother came with tears in her eyes. Loving us to the point of short sightedness, mother did not want us to be punished. I remember the debate that took place while we stood facing the wall, the headmaster at last convincing her that in our own

interests we had to be severely checked Mother left us in the room

"Come here," said the Head sternly to me

I went, abjectly, I am sure

'Have you any excuse?' he asked, not omitting that usual verbal preliminary

"No, Sir "

'Aren't you ashamed to treat your mother this way?'

'Yes, Sir "

He gave me a rare trouncing, the most salutary I ever received in a public school Probably I expressed my agony audibly

"Stand in the corner "

And then something happened which solved my school problem for many years, for it was fortuitous and brought me the respect of teachers, despite our poverty

"Come here," the Head said to my brother

It could not have been deliberate courage, it must have been sheer impulsiveness, for I had been well licked and had no appetite for a second dose I am sure I was superlatively afraid of the strap But I whirled and placed myself in front of Douglas and melodramatically defied the Head Maybe it was an instinctive expression of that rat like loyalty that is found where people wear common chains I could lumply accept my own gruel but swelled to defiance because of my brother's plight

"You mustn't hit him Sir "

"Why not?"

"Hit me It was my fault he wagged it "

If he had taken me at my word I probably would have wailed piteously

Practical little Douglas never argued It was my fault I was telling the truth And Douglas was afraid of the strap as well The Head thrust me aside to reach his whimpering victim I forced my way back, impulsively uttering what I would never have said in cold blood

"Hit me, Sir! Hit me instead!"

The Head paused and looked down at me.

Oh 't was your fault, was it?"

Yes, Sir "

He decided to test my fortitude

' All right He caught hold of me and I did not outwardly shrink, though I was inwardly fearful

He put down the strap patted me on the head, called in my mother

"Send them to school to morrow "

He had an afterthought and addressed himself to me

"And if you play truant, I'll punish your brother "

When we got home with mother she sat down rested her arms on the kitchen table and cried And that hurt me more than the Head's strap, although it didn't seem to trouble my brother or sister It was extremely distressing to realize I had brought trouble to her Mother was distressed The family she was slaving for were on the road to Hell I remember comforting her in that bare kitchen

' Don't cry, mother I won't do it again I'm sorry '

I know I was really sorry I was always sorry, afterward Those susceptible emotions of mine used to make me feel what mother felt But I was sorry for mother rather than for my sins I meant I would never offend again when I promised, but the flesh was always erring and weak

For a while everything brightened up Mother got more regular work, and was able to get her watch out of pawn, and we were packed off to school in time Douglas never absented himself again in a very distinguished school life Rose returned to school for a short time until something, of which I am ignorant, caused the Head to connive at her permanent absence long years before she was really due to leave I think a teacher had been guilty of some act, but Rose was the sufferer The teacher continued to teach while Rose ran wild upon the streets

When I returned to school after the truancy I found myself a hero The Head had been loud in praising me for defending my brother to the teacher of our class Thereafter she took an interest in my fortunes I ceased to be a pupil and became a person. She helped me to make good the arrears of lessons lost by absence The watch out of pawn kept me punctual. I

gained my self respect, for the teacher's approbation helped to make up for the patches in my trousers I was not, like my brother, an industrious pupil who tenaciously defended his right to the top of the class I was fitful Either I astonished the teacher with a stroke of brilliance that took me like a meteor to the top of the class, or else I sat in disgrace near the bottom because my soul was beyond the four walls I dreamed with an intensity that, applied to lessons, would have made me top of the class continually I was alternately the teacher's despair and delight. She would select me for show purposes on account of a prior piece of superlative work, and my mind would play truant and I would let down her judgment disgracefully Perhaps a regular place at the top of the class is due more to the coaching of parents than to the personal application of the pupil, except with such rare and persevering souls as my brother, who never opened a book at home, but yet gave such classroom zest to all his effort that he sat at the head of the class for many years

I was moved into the third standard and my teacher there was more than a woman earning her weekly living. She was genuinely interested in boys and girls With that irreverence that is characteristic of childhood we called her Monkey. Monkey was that human rarity who paid more attention to children from humble homes than she did to the well-off pupils. She would go so far as to help mend a pupil's boots, and she would conceal the fact of her generosity I remember one day she saw a boy sitting with water gathered around his leaky boots, and she sent him at once to the nearest snob I was a friend of the boy He was only ill equipped because his father drank too much of a considerable wage I used to do the boy's drawing for him. Once I drew his work and he got the highest marks in the class, and then I drew my own and got the lowest.

"Excellent," Monkey said at the drawing, "I never knew you could draw so well"

"Poor, very poor," she said to me "I never knew you could do so poorly."

His father was in charge of the Council's garbage tip, so

we called him Tip. He smirked and beamed, lording it over me as though I had not done both drawings. It was hard to bear.

Monkey had a human affection for me. She always aided the social outcasts, and I was the poorest boy in the room. I caught up the leeway I had lost through truancy, and I developed an affection for that severe old spinster who, when in the mood, could lay about her resoundingly with her leather. I was still absolutely unconscious of all the mystery of sex, of all its attributes, and I was for months haunted by a peculiar dream. In some inexplicable way Monkey's flesh and mine had become amalgamated until it seemed that I slept curled up within her body. The emotional ecstasy of that dream state was such that I went to bed consciously striving to induce the state of mind that would repeat the dream experience. I would pause, drowsily, in the early morning, and attempt to drift into that merging of flesh. The dream was clean. There was nothing grubby nor irreverent about it. It went hand in hand with a deep respect for the teacher and an innocence of all the physical properties of sex. I never have recorded that dream until this moment, and would not now, except that perhaps others have had similarly recurring dreams, and I have wondered if I was not merely instinctively continuing to appreciate the sheltering security of the womb. That instinctive merging of bodies as though the flesh and the spirit of each were completely absorbed in the other was ecstasy.

If children at such a time could freely divulge the phantasies of their minds to some wise confessor, what a moment that would be for the clean unfolding of the miracles of love and conception and birth! Then, the child's mind would be possessed of ecstatic wonder, rather than an urge forward prompted by grubby curiosity. I feared mentioning my dream of sensual but not sinful beauty. Thousands of children in such dreams probably recapitulate the experience of being carried in their mother's womb and, while undergoing the joy of that recapitulation of love, they go about believing that they were born in cabbages and sauce bottles, afraid to mention the wonder of the dream lest they be chastised. If that be sin, I sinned deliberately, throwing myself back repeatedly into the

mental state which gave me the joy of that affectionate b'ending

During these years men were going to the Boer War, and messages of victories were being constantly flashed through, messages greeted with ringing of bells, the blowing of whistles, and school holidays. Once I stood on the Dunedin sidewalks and watched a contingent of men departing for the African Veldts. Dunedin was alive with bunting, glittering bayonets, and playing bands. Crowds are never so frenzied as when they cheer men away to death. Because the young and the adventurous were preparing to lay down their lives, it was a gala day. *Good bye, Dolly Gray Sons of the Sea, The Soldiers of the Queen* stirred our blood as similar refrains stirred the blood of millions in 1914. We vibrated with the rhythm of marching feet and yelled in patriotic glee as living blood marched towards parched Veldts. I cheered as much as any child. But I remember how a tragic note in the cheering brought a swelling to my throat stifling much foolish yelling.

Frequently, the ringing of the bells liberated us from the dreariness of school. Ladysmith, Mafeking, Pretoria, all of these victories had to be extravagantly celebrated even by us, as though the Soldiers of the Queen were bringing respite from our poverty. And in a way they did. Such glorious victories caused groups of patriotic citizens to distribute paper pokes of largess to poor children. The Salvation Army organized many such distributions, and many a queue I worked myself along many times in a day. And patriotism had a cash value. I went selling flags. But the people who bought flags, although patriotic, were not always honourable. I gave excessive change to a man who bought the most expensive flag. When I returned to get back my money, he chased me off the premises, although there was guilt written all over his countenance. Thus I lost a day's earnings.

All children and all childish adults are ardent patriots in the blood and thunder sense. I was ardently patriotic and, like every Britisher of the time and other times, believed that a Britisher could fight and kill twenty of every other white race, and about a hundred Hindus or Chinese. Strange how that faith never perished in the Boer War but only on the battle-



fields of Europe. I lived for the day when all the world map would be painted red, and the honour, integrity and courage of the British King would make glad a universal heart.

School history is written to catch the sympathy of the youngster. History made me sorry that Bonnie Prince Charlie had been defeated. I could never understand how anyone bred and born a gentleman, as were the Stuarts, could have been overthrown by the minions of the gutter called Round Heads. The Cavalier with his long curls and swaggering mien had a warm place in my own gutter heart. The wrong-headed efforts of ordinary people to checkmate a King were beyond understanding. A country without a King was as saltless porridge. History and song reassured us in our faiths. At home we sat shivering around a few coals and sang our regrets.

*"Bonnie Charlie's now awa,  
Safely o'er the friendly main.  
Many's the heart that's a in twa,  
Will ye no come back again."*

How often in our hovel did we brood over the sorrows of a prince.

## **The bum at the throne of God**

**EVEN** when the larder was bare, we seemed to be able to get much religious advice and many tracts. There was plenty of religion in our sinful and impecunious home, even in its most sinful and poverty-stricken moments. Not that mother ever went to church, but merely that she believed, and saw to it that we attended Sunday School. Sometimes she scraped three halfpence together so that we might all add a portion to the mission for the heathen. Perhaps mother thought such Sunday instruction would save us from utter damnation and at least keep us from mischief. Alas, for faith unaccompanied by good works.

We always glad'y journeyed to Sunday School There was an air of brightness about Sunday School and its singing in that pre radio and pre gramophone day Occasionally we were able to secure invitations to paupers' picnics We were given a ticket, the text of which we were supposed to memorize, and mother always accepted the ticket as evidence of our attendance We never attended on wet Sundays Lack of overcoats meant a lack of godliness I am sure the teacher valued the pupils according to social standing, clothing and regularity of contributions to heathen missions so we must have been at a substantial discount Our contribution was an odd halfpenny, our parentage was obscure our clothing was patched cast offs I am convinced that the teacher believed that holiness should be well dressed I am sure that the boy who put threepence in the plate was an embryo angel whereas, when we passed the plate on, we were imps of Satan The teacher was probably correct in her assumptions But at least I was as conscious of my sin as the "Threepenny Boy" was of his virtue When the plate came to me shining with silver, and others sniggered as I looked down and passed it on I knew what a wretch I was Maybe I was supersensitive

Sometimes there would be an announcement of a special collection to be taken up, and despite the warning we would turn up next Sunday without a halfpenny, halfpenny, that coin which exaggerated the gulf more than no coin at all

"Willie, what have you got for the starving children of India?"

The teacher always commenced where she knew the highest and most honourable donation would be

"Threepence, Miss Moore "

"Albany?"

She knew the answer in advance but persisted with the question, asking it in a different tone than that applied to Willie Willie knew warmth, encouragement , I knew severity, reproof And our iniquity had to be told to the whole world

"Nothing, Miss Moore "

What a rotten skunk I was, overweighed with my sense of guilt To have nothing for the hungry babies in India Singularly, I never associated my guilt with my mother Rose

did My cross was my own Miss Moore would shrug her shoulders and smile pityingly, even reassuringly, but the evil was done I was a religious deadhead scrounging my salvation, a Bum at the throne of God

But although I believed as most children believe going to church was a convention and a means to an odd picnic or tea-fight until one great night when my mind and my emotions played me an awful trick For on that night I was tricked into an emotional conversion

The experience belonged to a Sunday night in early summer A small group of religious zealots were holding services in a nearby schoolroom For a lack of better pastime I went The preacher was a tall, dark, heavy man He had, in addition to his fine presence, a resonant voice, a marvellous play of gesture, a capacity of enthusiastic eloquence His simple methods and his burning zeal upset my emotional balance He could not have been a really great public orator or he would not have been conducting his services in a small schoolroom, but he must have had much animal magnetism When he spoke, he seemed to glow, exuding an aura His personality sent out waves that instantly tuned in with my own personality

The small number in attendance sang hymns Between hymns the speaker prayed The hymns selected the man's magnetism, the small room which brought me close enough to see the play of emotion on his face induced a receptive condition in me early in the service And then came his impassioned harangue As he delivered himself his eyes flashed fire, his body nervously radiated conviction My unimpressionable brother sat by my side unmoved, but I was gathered up and carried along Swept free of all restraint, I felt the flames of Hell and damnation crackling around my flesh and bones I saw the sorrowful appealing Jesus brooding over my punishment

The preacher seemed alternately the most terrible man in Dunedin and the most lovable From a graphic picture of cruel punishment he painted a picture of abounding love And he did more than paint a picture He felt the quality of the picture he saw and he made me feel too Literal Hell he fashioned and then literal Heaven Yes, for even me, a pauper,

he built a mansion of dazzling and pure splendour. And back again he went to Hell He placed my body in a searing, molten, flaming terror, so that I could almost feel the pain and catch the odour of the burning And from beyond the flame a sorrowful, wet-eyed Jesus contemplated my sin with arms outstretched, even for me

The heart of the speaker seemed to weep for the doomed How sad it was to become an inhabitant of Hell when I had only to humble myself to be exalted to that mansion of Heaven! I was among the doomed I heard him say it We were all born in sin He said it at me I had always believed, although I had never made open confession of faith. I believed because I feared God's wrath But the speaker wanted me to believe because of Holy Love If I did not, I was doomed, perhaps that very night Once upon a time a man had decided to delay conversion for a year or two, and he had been killed the very night he made that decision The speaker had me in his grasp I forgot the others present There was no doubt in my mind but that he was warning me personally I was doomed doomed And it was so sad and unnecessary and agonizing I almost remember the words which cast me into emotional travail, and the vibration of his voice which showered around my senses, assailing my resolution

"And now I am going to pray and I want everybody to close their eyes and not spy upon their neighbours while I pray And if any lost soul wants to commit his soul to Jesus, let that erring one raise a hand and after the public meeting we will lead that soul to grace"

The preacher had me I shut my eyes unnaturally tight It was my custom merely to avert my eyes and then to watch all the others round me through chinks in my fingers and whisper and laugh with my brother But at the preacher's injunction I shut out the light and left myself in darkness alone with my conscience Tightly those eyes were glued and I was afraid to break faith and peep round at those in the audience who might be wrestling with the devil And through the darkness that enthusiastic, now compelling, now beseeching voice But I sat alone in the darkness and resisted the compulsion of the voice until I trembled before the thought of Almighty wrath.

I remained a stubborn sinner with the waves of eloquent entreaty beating at my senses The voice sang a verse Other voices joined softly

*"Where will you spend eternity?  
This question comes to you and me  
What shall the final answer be?  
Where will you spend eternity?  
Eternity, eternity  
Where will you spend eternity?"*

Still I defied Emotionally conquered, a stubborn something bid me hold out and refuse to yield publicly

"Will you hold up your hand? Will you hold up your hand?"

I kept my eyes tightly shut while the persistent waves of entreaty came again and again and again, sapping at my weakening resolution

"Hold up your hand! Surrender! Surrender! Surrender!"

Through the dark came that impassioned injunction The voice sank to a whisper And I resisted To a lower whisper the voice sank, so that salvation from Hell fire seemed to be receding

"Yield! Hold up that hand! Yield! "

How his suppressed voice with the falling away of sound that suggested a broadening gulf held me in hypnotic spell!

"Oh, surely you will!"

The air was tense with his earnest agony at the perverse fate to which we were consigning ourselves And I held out with bated breath, the sweat rising upon my forehead. And all his eloquence appeared like to fall against my senses in vain when a hideous, paralysing thought came into my mind

"Surrender Surrender," his voice was swelling again

More powerful than all fear of eternal flame was the dread that suddenly possessed me I was afraid of molten, crackling flame I was anxious for heavenly splendour, but those attractions and repulsions I could ignore, but not that other awful thought For I was of the herd Is the herd instinct at the root

of all religion? I knew the fear of being isolated. The outcast wanted to be the social animal for once

"Suppose," my mind said—an awful supposition—"suppose everyone in the room except me has a hand up?"

What a terrific strain that idea placed upon the stubbornness of a small, emotional boy Suppose I was alone, alone? Everyone else with a hand uplifted and one boy sitting in darkness with a guilty hand kept in check The prayer continued I sweated in doubt and agony I was shut by my hypnotized lids into immense, dark loneliness, loneliness bridged only by an entreating, receding voice Everyone was going, going away Oh, what doubt I had! Across the gulf that separated me from everyone, the voice boomed, now commanding, now drawing a picture of the fire, now holding out the eternal fire escape

"Don't be an outcast! Don't be a leper! Surrender! Hold up that hand!"

How the voice rang in my ears! How the waves of passion rang in my soul! I wanted to open my eyes and see if I was alone in sin, but I feared to spy on God I could defy God's entreaty, but I couldn't spy upon Him

"Raise up your hand! Lift up your hand to Heaven!"

Was I the only recalcitrant? The only one who was stubborn against the threat of eternal damnation? I did not want to be damned, but I was most in fear of physical and mental isolation

The organ played softly The preacher's adherents sang softly Do all evangelists in that last moment of entreaty sing that same mournful hymn?

*"Almost persuaded Christ to believe,  
Almost persuaded Christ to receive,  
Almost is no avail, almost is but to fail.  
Sad, sad, that bitter wail,  
Almost but lost."*

Almost but lost Oh, the agony of that wailing, piteous line to a child in utter darkness, who singly refuses to elevate a hand in surrender.

"Lift up your hand to God! "

The sickly anæsthesia of evangelism sapped at stubbornness  
How could a child hold out against the pull of the herd?  
Patriotism is of the herd Evangelism is of the herd Manners  
are of the herd Peas are eaten from a fork and not a spoon,  
not because of convenience, but because of the herd The  
heretic who sips tea from a saucer causes the spine of the herd  
to twitch Follow the leader, sometimes for good, sometimes  
for bad When the stampeding sheep jumps an imaginary  
obstacle, all jump How could I, the most impressionable,  
stand out? How could I unflinchingly hold out amid my sin  
when every other hand in the room was elevated but mine?  
How could I hold out with another verse of the herd ringing in  
my ears?

*"Almost is but to fail,  
Almost but lost "*

My individuality must go with the stampede of the mob If  
not, my eyes would open to universal condemnation I didn't  
want to be an outcast

' We cannot await any longer "

How terrible that was Opportunity was fleeting Indecision  
must end

"When you go out to night you may die This may be your  
last chance "

To go with all or to be isolated in darkness It never  
dawned upon me that I could break the spell by opening my  
eyes

"Surely you will not die in sin "

I saw myself being carried home dead, white and stiff He  
was speaking to me, to me alone I knew it All the others were  
being delayed by my perversity Directly they would stop  
and I would be shut out Shut out alone Terrible thought! My  
hand stretched in a frenzy lest God and the preacher see it not

Oh the bitterness, the infinite humility I was destined to  
taste! I was caught in a net from which there was no escape  
I was crushed shamed, degraded I had made a ghastly mis-

take. The voice told me I had been tricked, that I was a fool, so that I shut my eyes for another reason, too ashamed to look the world in the face. The voice prayed, thanking God that one hand had been held up, that "one wee laddie" had decided to don God's armour. The power seemed to go from the voice. I knew that I had been an ass. I felt the voice laughing at me. I was trapped and snared.

"Put down your hand, child, and stay with us afterward."

I opened my eyes, and as soon as they were used to the light I averted them. I was the centre of attention. Some there were who were kindly, some young fellows with an amused grin. My brother was wondering what it was all about. I was a fool, I bitterly realized.

After the meeting, the committee prayed and sang over me, but my emotions had been exhausted for one night. I did not respond. I was promised fruitful life in the service of the Lord. And I went home with bowed, shamed head. The evangelist called once upon our poor home, but its bleakness must have scared him off. And it was not much of an achievement on his part to fish for whales and catch such a minnow as me. I never went again. I was afraid they might trap me again.

"Wot did you raise your hand for?" Douglas asked.

"I thought everyone else had."

"I didn't. I peeped through my fingers."

When the Blind lead the Blind both shall fall into the ditch. That was my great religious experience. I was of the herd and yet I was less of the herd than anyone present that night. But if all had honourably shut their eyes and let that voice assail their ears, what then?



## PART FIVE

### **Sex: a study in economic determinism**

I CRFW longer and stronger, although it was due to a toughening of rather than an increase in the quantity of the flesh. My vitality seemed amazing, like the lean, tireless vitality of a hungry wolf. I could outrun and outlast friend or enemy of similar age. And my wits were sharper since I had never been dulled by an overloaded stomach. Maybe it was not sinewy legs that thrust me along at the head of the gang and scraggy arms that dragged me over the highest fence. Perhaps the mainspring of even physical motion is the imaginative dynamo within.

A neighbour, generous fellow, endowed me with hundreds of well-thumbed, greasy, dog-eared volumes about Buffalo Bill and Deadwood Dick—the collection of youthful years now spurned because he had graduated to Nat Gould and Guy Boothby. From that moment my spare time was devoted to an omnivorous absorption of their contents. Late into the night—since we got a packet of candles each week with the benevolent society's chit—I would strain my eyes and feast my emotions. In the morning, I would rise and go drowsily to school.

I gathered a little gang around to play the stories I read. Despite our lack of social standing there was always a profusion of boys from more comfortable homes, who were attracted by my rich inventiveness, or perhaps my unblushing plagiarism, for my games were filched from the penny backs

So, being rich in the way of make believe, I led the gang spiritually as well as physically

We were only a few steps from torrential or trickling Leith, and above the stream, Tannehill towered Barefoot, we would climb the steep clay bank, stepping into fissures, clinging desperately to tufts of grass Our armament varied with the season, but we would have most of the time, bows made of old umbrella ribs, and about our waist would be arrows of soft, pithy elderberry Perhaps, also, our pockets would bulge with those magnificent missiles, bluegum cones Repeatedly, we would ssh each other, for we were buoyed upwards by the certainty of surprising an imaginary enemy of cruel disposition Tannehill has since been shovelled away to provide a building site

When the Leith was a mere polluted trickle, we would steal up the centre of the stream, bare feet amid the slippery boulders, fancying the few deep pools, bottomless The dark, still places would be filled with the dangers of stream and ocean Sharks, whales, blood suckers, alligators, crocodiles, water-snakes, were all there With the child's supreme contempt for natural history, fresh and salt water denizens harassed our slipping feet at every step Mentally induced horror is always more frightening than the real The intangible shadows of the mind are not easily fought And therein lies the thrill, for if dark pools had failed to chill the spine, our consciousness of flaunting a steadfast bravery would have been missing Sometimes, for long periods, we would lie prostrate on our faces, peering from the hill-top through tall grass towards bends around which the Leith flowed, alert for the canoes of the cruel red men that were to come shooting the rapids. I knew the correct action for such moments I could carefully draw back the curtain of grass with a most impressive and stealthy action of my hand and whisper with the maximum of dramatic effect

"Sh——"

"Right oh"

"Don't let them see you"

"No—o," the monosyllable stretched in time though subdued in volume.

Whispering, we would prepare our bloody ambush

New Zealand has never established its own culture except of material things. For decades it has called Britain Home, a term that is finally being discarded. New Zealand had Maori wars in which the Native Race, in its resistance to the encroachments of the white, alternated between blood curdling ferocity and chivalry. Maybe the Maori was too generous a foeman, despite his reputed willingness to eat his captive, but the fact is that our childish games reflected the struggles of Buffalo Bill rather than local history. We were always Indians, or else we fought them. The cruelty of the Redskin satisfied our lust to be heroes. We wanted a foe who threatened every movement with arrow and tomahawk, with scalping and torture—one who would accept the same hideous treatment without a groan. Such an opponent compelled an unremitting vigilance. A false step and we were undone. The Redskin excited maximum apprehension and kept our endeavours taut. Anyone could resist the qualities of a generous foeman, but only great qualities such as ours could outwit or outbrave the attack of monsters. We fought the Red Indian or played the Red Indian because we were giants of strategy and hardihood.

When we tired of play and idled for a few moments' talk of ourselves before we dispersed. I was at once the most silent and embarrassed youngster in the gang. Then, I was at a disadvantage. Boys would talk of their homes, of what they were to have for the evening meal, of what their parents were doing or buying, or of where they had been or were going for a picnic. Sometimes the talk would be about sex. A precocious boy would hazard information. I was the dunce, for the subject had not yet appealed to my imagination. It was of grubby unimportance beside more urgent ones. I was not pure; merely indifferent. I had had lessons of sorts in the birth of the bastard, but I was none too sure, accepting the results without troubling over the causes. I was too far from manhood to be curious emotionally. My mind was too full of Buffalo Bill and Deadwood Dick.

Thus such conversation bored me. Virtue or lack of curiosity had nothing to do with my attitude. The spark that compels interest had not been fired. Once, I was invited to

a visual demonstration of the physical results of sex to be given by a big boy, but I stayed away, indifferent, and retaining a most fantastic idea of what the demonstration would be like. Sex was merely dull, puny, lacked the thrills. Why waste time therefore on its discussion or on a display of something so unthrilling. A ghost story was a more alluring mystery than a sex story. And this abysmal and infantile ignorance led me into persuasions which shamed my adult years. I acquired a guilt, knowledge of which came years after in a blinding moment of enlightenment. Knowledge of guilt came when *restitution was impossible, except that restitution take the form of a crusade against poverty*. For the world has other daughters, and the gutter is international. As I write, there are thousands of unemployed girls in New Zealand, and they live in starved and under nourished homes.

I, who was so wise, was blind. I knew how to steal fruit from the best trees. In this knowledge I could have passed with honours. I knew how to occasion the maximum of annoyance to quiet, decent folk. Knocking on doors, stretching rope across pavements, putting stones in paper bags for the passer by to kick, emptying people's ash cans on their verandahs, tarring door knobs for unexpected hands—in all these spheres I was the adept. Bushranger, Outlaw, Scout, Red Indian, Burglar, about them all I had encyclopædic knowledge. And in physical feats I was ostentatiously courageous. If my arms were too weak for me to turn a handspring, I could dare to walk stilts six inches higher than anyone else, because, having stolen the wood and put the blocks too high, I was more afraid of the humiliation of lowering them than of the danger of breaking my neck. Oh yes, I was wise and smart, the ignorant know all.

Rose was old beyond her years in the matters of sex. The sex education of the pretty and neglected daughter of the very poor is completed at a very early age, and is as thorough as it is cruel. Playing unchecked for long days around the streets when mother was at work, denied everything for which her heart craved, hungry for the flavour of palate and the adornments of finery. Rose must have been an easy target for the intentions of a certain type of young man—for any man for

that matter There were many eager to use her poverty to appease their lusts Perhaps the young men were guilty of no great fault Society is organized to victimize the very poor Have not sententious Victorian philosophers declared that the ease of access to these gutter daughters resulted in the salvation of the morality of the daughters of aristocrats? The very poor never have had any defence against such aggressions, and have none to day The bald head with money takes the maiden to the cabaret Flesh is as cheap as ever

As I have said I had some idea of the gymnastics of the sex act but no idea of its emotional or physical mechanics and the biological significance of the act was still obscure I am sure I never believed that a child must inevitably follow careless indulgence Buffalo Bill was never troubled with such problems and all the true loves recorded in the penny booklets which I picked up were so silly that I skipped those places Love interfered with the detection of the criminal, held the story in suspense and wasted pages better devoted to action So, when certain young men came to my sister and offered her certain sums of money, I was staggered by her refusals

"Why not? I would if I were you"

"You don't know what you say"

"I know what I would do if I were a girl"

"You would not"

"Of course I would There's no harm if no one knows"

"You don't know what you say"

"I do so I wish I was a girl"

"You don't"

"I do I would soon take the money"

I would have, too, undoubtedly I loved Rose I loved her fiercely I would have gone into a furnace for her, but I could not see sense in turning down such a fine financial proposition The things which money could buy glittered in front of me Rose seemed guilty of monumental stupidity The young men offered me money for persuasion Eloquent and persistent, I was dismayed at Rose's mulish stubbornness I did not understand how precious were the goods she had to sell, the goods I tried to barter

"Think of the toffee we could buy."

You don't know what you are asking."  
I do I do Bananas, two a penny "  
Oh, go away "  
"And lemonade "  
"Leave me alone "  
"And stale hot pies a penny each "  
"I won't! I won't!"  
"If I was a girl and someone gave me money I would."  
"I won't "  
"You won't always be able to get money like this!"  
Her perversity seemed criminal All persuasion was resisted.  
'I can get money any time I like and more than you  
think "

That was an eyeopener to me

"If you can, why don't you?"

"I won't "

I was defeated The young philanthropist and benefactor who had wanted generously to enrich us retired annoyed. We were left poor How I railed at Rose's foolishness! She had bitten the hand outstretched to aid her

"He won't come back again "

"I hope he doesn't "

But he came back to offer a glittering three shillings Such lavish wealth dazzled me But Rose was unimpressed, cantankerous Once before, I had swaggered through life spending a stolen half-crown The three shillings danced before my eyes I would have committed any indiscretion for half the sum To know only halfpence and have the chance of acquiring three shillings! Why wasn't I a girl? I doubted my sister's sanity Why wasn't I a girl? Why, what was asked was such a trifle that the stupidity of the person who offered the money was equal to the stupidity of the person who refused Oh, if I had only been a girl!

"No! No! No!"

"Oh, Rose?"

"And if he doesn't go away I'll tell someone "

That threat hurried the would be noble donor of three shillings away It was a cold douche in the face of the magnanimous.

"He wants to do you a good turn."

"He doesn't."

But time wrought changes. It takes very little persistence and not too much money to break down the resistance of the destitute. And if the very poor are children running wild while the parent is absent from daylight until dark earning shelter and bread, the process is hastened. More cruel than Red Indian savagery is the cruelty of Christian civilization.

Long before Rose approached her teens she began to stay out quite late at night. Mother, weary with drudgery, also knew the misery of waiting up half the night for Rose to come home. I secured a share of the dainties Rose bought after staying out late. One awful night, and then I knew where she came from.

Mother had given up trying to restrain her in the unequal contest. Mother was tired, weary, could only be negative. Rose was young; the world outside offered positive thrills. Mother retired from the contest, sensing the cruelty of restrictive punishments, refusing to commit any of us to a state home.

"Will you come to the vaudeville?" Rose asked me one night.

"Will I?"

I could scarcely believe my ears. To the theatre. To the magic place festooned with electric light, of which I had seen only the boardings outside, the posters of which promised such glittering fun! Would I go to where men painted their faces black and rattled bones and tambourines, where people walked tight ropes and turned somersaults! I had been wanting to go for years.

"Yes. Will you?"

"You're not joking?"

"No! Come on then!"

"But it costs money."

"I'll get the money."

"How will you get the money?"

"You won't tell?"

"No. I won't tell."

"You'll see."

We told mother that someone was giving us tickets. Her permission was forthcoming. We set off in the gloom of a winter's night penniless, and carried along by Rose's undaunted assurance.

"How will you get the money?"

"You'll see."

I did not actually see. What provided the money was left to my imagination, and it took time to imagine clearly. Sex was so foreign a language.

We went down into an awful Chinese den which festered near the heart of the city and beneath the shadow of its most respectable steeple. We knocked at a door. It was opened only sufficiently to let us both in. The solitary occupant of the room was a huge, saturnine Chow. I gathered that others had gone out for the night. Delighted to see Rose, the Chow latched the door securely from the inside. She had been down in the den many times before. Her apprenticeship had long since been served. The conversation they engaged in was obscure to me. I was ignored as the Chow gazed at Rose with eager, fascinated eyes. The room was poorly furnished, dirty, lit by candlelight that fluttered in the draught. An open doorway led to a black room. Suddenly Rose spoke to me.

"You stay here."

"Where are you going?"

"Into the next room."

"But will you be long?"

"No! But you stay here!"

I sat in an old chair; Rose and the sombre Chow went into the blackness of the open door. He smelled of the smoked fish he hawked from door to door. He paused at the door to turn and smile.

"Here is threepence, leetle boy," he managed to say.

They entered the next room and shut the door without lighting a candle. I was alone. The idea of those two in the dark room gave me the creeps at once. What were they at in the impenetrable darkness? My spine tickled the moment the door shut. A silence descended upon the room in which I sat and no sound came from the room beyond. And the



silence was emphasized as all such silences are by the heavy ticking of the cheap clock on the dirty mantelpiece I listened so intensely to the ticking that it seemed to vanish altogether and then return again, that trick of all clocks to the ears of frightened people listening in otherwise silent rooms

In a very few minutes it seemed as if I had been waiting for years I succumbed to terror The darkness and the closing of the door had shut Rose off so completely with that awful Chow! The shadows of furniture that danced as the candle fluttered became living shapes I kept looking over my shoulder with that certainty that conjures up phantoms The dark corners were full of heavy Chow eyes Not a whisper, not a sign of life, no sound of moving feet or furniture came from the other room where something dreadful was happening Truly light and lust are deadly enemies But it was for myself and not for my sister I feared For I was alone, fearfully alone I strained my ears to catch human movement What if the Chow and Rose had gone out somewhere by a back door, leaving me by myself in the house? Fearful thought!

"Rose? Rose?" I cried

No answering voice came back I tried to control my chattering teeth I repeated my sister's name again, more quietly though more tensely afraid of the unexplainable things a loud tone might jar to annoyance

"Rose? Rose? Rose?"

And no answer Not a whisper came out of the night, out of walls impregnated with stealth and suspicion

"Rose? Rose? Rose?"

She was only ten or eleven How tough the world had made her! And I was about two years younger No sound came back Maybe my entreaty was of the subdued order, loud in my own breast, muffled, almost stifled by my fear.

"Rose! Rose! Rose!"

Perhaps it was merely a whisper that I uttered so stealthily as not to be heard by the shadows which danced when the candlelight fluttered. Maybe it was an internal whisper echoing within because I was tuned to catch the emanation of

even feeling Perhaps it did not disturb the silence with even a measure of hissing sibilance, for it evoked no response

'Rose! Rose! Rose!'

I was driven by fear at last to cross the room and throw the door open And the room was black and dead.

Who's there?' asked the Chow

I stood terrified, unable to speak

It's me, I chattered at last

Go and sit down! Rose's voice floated out of the darkness

Rose? Rose?" I went on eagerly

I'm all right Go and sit down!"

'Get out!'" the Chow gruffly said Get out! Close the door, leetle boy!'

'Rose? Rose?'

'Don't be afraid! I'll be there soon"

Driven back, I sat down I feared only for myself My funk was paralysing I called again in whispers, afraid to say the name aloud for human ears as I had been afraid to say it before for the ears of the stealthy shapes Tick! Tick! Tick! the clock went For a minute it stopped ticking altogether, as straining ears were deluded The hands then seemed to move with a deceiving slowness Rose and the Chow could not have been away so very long before they returned, cheering me up at once for in her hand was money, big pieces of silver And in her heart was the gladness of success And I would have put my soul in pawn for money

'You shouldn't be frightened, leetle boy"

'I'm not frightened"

Nor was I, the moment I had company

"Come and see me again," the Chow told Rose. "And you come too," pointing at me "Have a leetle bowl of tea?"

Rose wanted the tea, but I desired to get out of the den, and my wishes were considered

"Don't ever tell?"

"Never"

But I was a child then I can tell now

My sister Rose, in long child's stockings, had become a

Chinese whore But I didn't know the real purport then of that word I doubt if Rose herself did She had money, hard, bright pieces of silver sufficient to buy tickets, lollies, fruit, a mysterious package from the chemist The money banished fear and invoked envy Why was I not a girl?

"Come and see me again, leetle boy"

At the show, I laughed at funny songs, and grew ambitious to be a performer of double somersaults And Rose also was bright and happy, free of care and as proud of standing treat as the most loving mother could have been True daughter of the slums, she graduated early When a moment of happiness came she was haunted by no future fear Sometimes later, I would see the Chow in the streets, and he would smile and call out to me

"Leetle boy Leetle boy"

I would cross the road to him

"When you and leetle sister come see me again?"

He would promise me a jar of preserved ginger if I would convey a message, and I liked preserved ginger But I never went again myself I had less courage than Rose

Rose should have been at school She was a child Magdalene on the streets And the Chow at least paid There came a white man, took possession of the child and her career and offered her only a meagre share of her earnings A day came when, looking backward, I could see why that wretch had always been about, with good clothes to wear and money to spend, while Rose was drab He grew plump and Rose, before she was out of her teens was dead She was a whore but once she sold herself to take me to a music hall to buy me things to eat If she was tough, she was tempered in Hell I was tempered in the same furnace

"You won't tell?"

"No I won't tell"

What was there to tell except that a Chow had handed over a sum of money, and that I was envious of all the race of girls For I had nothing to sell I was poor, which was bad enough Alas, I was also a boy

I saw another daughter of the poor launched upon a

career of prostitution. I was at the initiation ceremony. She was such another poorly clad child from a home very much like ours, except that her poverty was due to the drunkenness of her parents. One wet day a crowd of us gathered together in a covered-in railway truck to hear a big boy tell stories about a holiday in the country. A poorly clad, pretty little girl came loitering home from school, swinging her bag. The big boy had made overtures once before.

"Hullo, Milly."

"Hullo."

"Have a lollie?" he had a poke of sweets.

Milly had one.

"I'll tell you what," he went on.

"What?" Milly asked.

"You come into the truck and I'll give you threepence?"

My eyes bulged.

"No."

Threepence is a terrific temptation for a small girl from a hungry home, and Milly's home was not only poor but more vicious than ours, for at least we loved one another.

"No."

"Fourpence?"

"No."

"Fivepence?"

"No."

What an auction it was. I can see Milly standing first on one foot and then on another, swinging her school bag, desire and indecision fighting a battle. Desire for the fivepence. She was being compelled to decide while we all gazed down at her from the truck. She shrank from our interest; she was allured by the pence.

"Sixpence?"

"No."

Wealth, wealth beyond dreams! I marvelled at such a lavish spendthrift. In that moment, the boy became a hero. Each time Milly said "no," she seemed still more the fool. A boy who could lightly squander sixpence on such a trifle was an extraordinary fellow. What an ass I thought Milly for resisting.

although I subsequently wrongly accredited her with the cleverness of having forced the boy to the maximum figure

"That's all I've got," he grew despondent

"All right Give me the money"

She climbed into the covered car while we gathered around in a curious circle Only the big boy clearly knew what it was all about

What a stupid meaningless business it seemed! All I knew was what I saw Certainly the performance seemed waste of sixpence on the boy's part, so that I thought money was easy to earn if one was a girl But after that day, Milly was a target for cruel comment Boys openly accosted her, asking for favours She was pointed out whispered about The secret like all boys secrets became gutter property Milly was an outcast There grew up that attitude of mind towards her that I now can see surrounded Rose She had sold her privacy for sixpence and was public property As we whispered the big boy grew afraid He came to us extracting a promise never to tell, and then we whispered about his fear as well as his act He was alarmed lest there be procreative results He was also afraid of the police Milly like Rose was only a little girl

Despite such evidence of sight my sex education was far from complete I had contemplated the gymnastics without still understanding the physical or emotional reasons or consequences I ceased to take notice of the incident almost at once and reimmersed myself in my literature If by any mischance I found a love passage, I skipped it Dull business to read about, and a dreary business to watch My brother, years younger, who read no books and yarned a good deal on the corner, understood all of the facts long before I did

All I knew about sex that was attractive was that a girl could temper poverty by selling herself, and that I was condemned as a boy, to be one of those who paid And I didn't want to pay I wanted to earn

Sex to me was merely a question of money powers My attitude was dominated by the economic and not by the emotional boy And that's what determined Rose's attitude

## The galatea trousers

SHAME came increasingly with the passing of innocence. While we were ignorant as to the distinctive brand of our cast-off clothing, we had no reason to be sensitive on its account. We learned the pauper nature of our garb, learned how apparent the nature of the garb was to all eyes. When the clothes of a child impose upon it the brand of inferiority they make a huge difference in its life. When we were very small, the patched left offs of wealthier families occasioned no mental bother. Indeed, there was joy in the home and a measure of vain glorious pride at the acquisition of a new cast-off garment. But there came a dawning awareness of the indignity of ill fitting clothes that were in the last state of disrepair. Soon I understood that the boys of the street recognized the rapid changes of garb and understood its origins. Change must be more rapid when the garments are worn. When I paraded in old new clothes I was suspiciously examined and questioned.

"Where did you get those trousers?"

"Mother bought them."

"Did she buy them at a second hand shop?"

It took a bigger boy to ask that question.

"No, she did not!"

"Well, they're not new."

"I've worn them before. They've been away in a box."

"You have not."

As if I could take in any curious boy with a story like that. That sort of conversation used to knock a lot out of the pride that masks pauperdom. And what a point of honour it was to dissemble before the eyes of neighbours as though any artifice ever made them blind to the square, incongruous patches. What a pretence we made that our home was as well provided for as any other! How the effort to pretend must have emphasized the very things which we fought to conceal!

It is hard to hold up your head when everyone grins at your trousers. The conversation could take some other turn.

"Where did you get the boots?"

"Mother had them."

"But they're too big!"

"No, they're not. I've got big feet."

"Yes, they are. They look like someone else's."

All listeners would nod assent.

"They are not."

"Why are they so old before you wear them?"

On a wet day one might not wear boots at all, because one wanted to keep one's feet dry and because the boots were too full of holes. Holes always let water in, but never let it out.

"Hullo. You haven't got any boots, have you?"

"Of course I have."

"Why don't you wear them?"

"I'd rather go bare-foot."

"But not to school?"

"Yes."

"In winter?"

"I don't feel the cold."

Probably I didn't, being hot with embarrassment.

"My mother says that only very poor children go to school without boots and stockings. Hasn't your mother got any money?"

"Yes, she has."

"I don't believe you."

"Well, she has."

"Well, my mother says she hasn't."

Frequently, I remained inside rather than go out and play because of ill-fitting garments. In this regard I was stupidly sensitive. It wasn't the bagginess or the incongruity of the patches so much as the insurmountable challenge flung at me by other children. I would rather wear a ragged garment the boys were used to, than a better one which would cause questionings. Once the gang was used to the new article, I was at ease, and the nature of what I wore no longer concerned me. What hurt was the obvious parade of circumstances, for it left

my sensitiveness unclad, exposed. "Look at me!" my trousers seemed to say almost audibly. "This boy is fed and clothed by charity!"

We also attempted to be secretive about the Benevolent Society's order for groceries. But all our furtiveness was in vain. In the grocery store we were compelled to stand at a special counter labelled "Orders." We received salty butter and never argued about the staleness or quality of anything. Generally the order ran only to golden syrup and black treacle, which suited our palates better. There was sometimes a butcher's order, always, expended in getting "scraps" or "pieces" or mince meat. If mother dared to buy a joint, the noble donors frowned and suffered heartburning. Charity must taste like charity, lest poor folk develop an inflated idea of themselves. Little wonder that we practised deceit at a very early age, lying about the origins of our clothing and the state of mother's purse. We lied about the quality of the food we ate. We lied about our breakfasts. If we took lunch to school we lied about that, too, as we sat along a sunny fence watching others unfold tasty packages. Our lunch was bread spread with treacle or syrup, invariably the syrup or treacle would be absorbed into the bread at lunch-time. Good enough too, I hear you say. Perhaps!

"I don't care for cake."

That was a whopper, but looking back I am glad we could lie.

"I don't care for meat sandwiches."

"Don't you?"

"I don't like butter and jam on the same piece of bread."

"Don't you?"

We had the virtue of being courageous liars.

Beneath a hard shell, I was appallingly sensitive. Garbed in fresh cast-offs I would set out for school beset by apprehension, ready to flinch from every accusing eye. And yet I never let mother know of my feelings. She had enough to bear. I would pretend satisfaction so as not to wound her, and then, hurrying to school, keep myself in a quiet corner until the bell rang. But children can be cruel.



Time came when the changing nature of mother's work introduced her to places where she got better wages and fewer cast-offs and left overs. The charitable generally pay poor wages. More money became available for clothing. But insufficient money still had unfortunate results. The awful consequences of penury are inescapable. I remember a year I attended school to witness a gala break up. We were all invited to attend, wearing our Sunday Best. I had no Sunday Best and my week day clothing was in a bad way. But mother was making me a new suit. It was the day of galatea blouses with the sailor front and collar. Mother had bought a few yards of cheap material. Setting to work, she soon had my new suit finished. I liked the material and the neat sailor front. On the day for the breaking up I proudly set out.

"Hullo. You've got a new suit."

Be sure that I was not inclined to minimize the importance of that fact.

"Yes. I've got a new suit. My mother made it."

"Galatea?"

"Yes."

"But why were the trousers made of galatea too?"

My house of pride went crashing. I looked anxiously around. There were dozens of galatea blouses, but among them all there was no boy garbed in galatea trousers. All the trousers were of serge or tweed.

"I like trousers of galatea."

"Yes. But no one else does."

Dare to be a Daniel! How easy it sounds if the convention you offend doesn't compel you to wear galatea trousers, if you dare convention with enough kudos to excite a measure of applause. But if the convention you shatter merely makes you odd boy out, and fetches no applause, what then? The sin of our poverty overwhelmed me in my moment of pride. I shrank away into an obscure corner. Every pair of eyes seemed to be taking in my galatea. I went to the lavatory. I jumped the back fence of the school. I fled, sneaking home guiltily, and dodging all eyes, while other children were making merry. My mind had elevated the new suit to a false

importance, and now my conscience sent me skulking away, whipped from the eyes of decent people I was poor I was odd Absurd sensitiveness I suppose it was But how many adults would go to a public function in galatea trousers? It wasn't the clothing It was what the clothing made manifest.

Today in the moment of world crisis when thousands of industrious, decent people are in abject distress I know of women who come from homes to sleep in the gloom of evening, because they are ashamed to parade themselves thread-bare in the broad light of day I know of people who starve rather than beg In time hunger will tame and train them and make them stand in the charity queue But I understand their shame, for I have worn galatea trousers

I never wore those trousers to school again and I never told my mother why For she had learned at last to be humble and the truth would have made her sad I am glad that there smouldered in me a revolting spark I had a patched and ragged pair of breeks scarcely fit for wear that I took from home, and each morning I changed them for the galatea behind a holly hedge in a public domain My shirt stuck out and my skin showed through the old pair but nakedness was more concealing than incongruity In due course, I destroyed the offending breeks and there was much searching and wondering In time they were forgotten

A little later we were able to buy pieces of material on a time payment basis a few pence a week, and we would have starved rather than have missed our payments After that, our clothing rendered us less conspicuous

Children are cruel little snobs who fail to understand the purport of what they say and, even when they do, they love cruelty for sheer joy of the hurt I understood very early and never made fun of anyone's clothes I never tugged a protruding shirt-tail to yell, "Giddy, giddy gout, your shirt's hanging out, five miles in and five miles out" I knew what a breach in one's pride could be made by a hole in the material that covers one's seat A few inches of shirt are nothing, but the shame entailed may be considerable

## **The Holy Willies throw a party**

SOMETIMES the Holy Willies would throw a party.

"Come to our Sunday School?"

"We go to Sunday School already."

"But ours is a better Sunday School."

"Why?"

"Because we're going to have a bun-fight."

"When?"

"Next week."

"Can we join in time?"

"You can join next Sunday."

That sort of conversation often occurred. We were ready material for proselytizing. Hot, tea, cakes and buns held out as an inducement to conversion could entice us to a new Sunday School over night. And, of course, in this we were not original. A string of beads and a piece of calico or a top hat and an egg-timer for the chief and a missionary has managed to convert a whole tribe. These days the way is more difficult. Prospective converts have a higher estimation of their sinful bargaining value.

We always had religion. The benevolent society which supplied free groceries was zealous for our spiritual welfare and insisted on a clean, religious certificate as a preliminary. Our Presbyterian mother believed that our weekly visitation to services might direct our erring footsteps to safe paths. I had religion, as many intelligent children inclined to rebel have religion. I believed enough to pray to God when I was in trouble. I feared God's wrath. I feared human wrath, so I appealed to heaven to be an accomplice, a shield.

As a child protrudes its tongue at the teacher's back, daring and yet fearful of being caught, so I metaphorically stuck out my tongue at God.

"There is no God."

Frequently I avowed that to timid companions who were

horrified and envious at my daring following up the affirmation afterwards by a silent prayer

"Oh, God, please let me off this time

"Suppose God strikes you down dead?"

There were always plenty of tracts to prompt that question. The literature of evangelism presented God as a peregrinating being who went around knocking down scoffers with their blasphemous challenges yet on their lips

"I don't care. He can't anyway."

But privately I didn't believe that I was so sure. He could that I grew troubled as I sinned. My daring was not an act of unbelief but an act of audacity. I wanted my listeners to understand I was a brave fellow. And immediately, the brave fellow had inward trepidations at the thought of heavenly spleen, so he would try and balance the debt with a credit.

"Dear God, let me off this time

Thought of punishment would compel me to quake, but boldly I would go forward to reply to questions. I am sure that from the cradle there was always a philosophical, cynical Albany Porcello who loved to watch the vacillations of Porcello the guttersnipe.

"But he might strike you down dead?"

"There is no God, I would say openly, silently praying to the God I denied.

About this time an evangelical landlord in Dunedin became involved in public disputation with an irreligious tenant. The tenant was a shopkeeper whom the landlord desired to evict from a shop for selling and openly exposing Rationalist Press Association reprints. When publicly challenged, the landlord stated his reasons from the street corner. I listened, attracted only by the crowd.

"My tenant," he said, "sells a book in which the Lord is described as the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier."

The religious susceptibilities of Dunedin were shocked. The shopkeeper became an outlaw supported by a few unconventional rebels who could not afford to buy books anyway. The controversy waxed fiercely. And without understanding the furious street corner debate delighted me. I was full of impish

joy at the consternation of the smug I had instinctive sympathy for the outlaw I learned the words of the landlord's statement I learned the words off by heart and repeated them to my audience

"Jesus is the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier If you come up the street I'll show you the book that tells all about it"

Children who heard the echoes of the dispute in their own homes shrank from me, alarmed Probably that is why a perverse something urged me to repetition If my trousers could bring only shame, my words could bring the lime light of notoriety There was joy and exhibitionism in my audacious defiance of God's wrath, joy followed, not by repentance but by timidity What an infidel I was! Afraid of the consequences of my blasphemy I did not pray for eternal salvation but for urgent temporal deliverance And surely if it is permissible to pray for the permanent cleansing of the eternal debit, it is permissible to pray for deliverance from imminent retribution

Despite this verbal unbelief, I was prepared to bury heretical hatchets and become truly faithful for a bun fight

"Join our Sunday School, there's a bun fight coming?"

That appeal was irresistible And as long as we went to Sunday School, mother allowed us liberty, liberty within Presbyterian confines She did not mind us being the cuckoos amid any nest of religious sparrows When we followed the loaves and fishes, mother knew economic insight The Holy Willies were going to throw a party Well, then, we had a duty to be there

We went over in a body—my brother and I And we were welcome The Sunday School was in the enthusiastic stages of a membership campaign More than our family were chasing the bun-fight The school had been divided into two factions, the red and the blue, with buttons, badges, squads and slogans A broad Scot had been to the United States and had come back with an American drawl added to his northern enunciation, and was applying an American method of spectacular evangelicism Each division of the school fought for adherents As in all such campaigns, few real heathen were caught from

off the streets, but many were gathered from other Sunday Schools Piracy is ever easier than conversion And even in adult evangelical campaigns, there is a permanent type of backslider who arrives to have a regular outburst as a periodical drunkard arrives in an hotel to let himself go This regularly backsliding convert is the bulk of the evangelists' raw material Our family could be seduced at any time as a donkey is supposed to be drawn by a carrot We were economic determinists in our choice of Sunday Schools

The Reds, whom we joined, won the campaign by two We prided ourselves upon the fact that we had conferred this great honour upon them Indeed when we received no more honour than any other two converts, we felt that the Reds were tardy and grudging in their recognition But on the Sunday we joined, we spent our halfpennies at the back door of a sweet shop Our presences were of sufficient importance to prevent any embarrassing questions Miraculously mother would scrape and deny to get that halfpenny but we were becoming used to preventing mother from the outrageous waste by spending our halfpennies for Russian Toffee

Then came the celebration the reward for our merits I remember that ghastly night For a whole week we had been keyed up with anticipation We turned up early, our faces shining with common household soap and goodwill We were hungry and excited We had arrived for the widow's mite We may have appeared eager, even greedy If we did, I have no apologies We were not the only eager ones The Bright Little Christians who wore new clothes and boots and who had been refreshed with a more appetizing meal than we were possessed of the same pagan anticipation But theirs was only the anticipation of a night, ours was the intense anxiety of a whole week We had come to enjoy the feast that we had bought and paid for by joining up, and we expected our full rights We were taken the least notice of because we were the most patched Maybe, like our clothes, we had a cast off appearance Blessed are the meek

First we were marshalled into the church hall where we sang and prayed, and then we went to the supper room The proselytizer with the American drawl was determined to fill

our souls to repletion with drawled sanctimony And as we prayed I held my hand reverentially across my eyes and peered through the openings between my fingers, gazing at the full plates The cakes were tantalizing I assayed the plates and made up my mind upon which I would first pounce when the time came I excitedly debated the merits of all that was offered Tart, custard, ice cream, or plain fruit cake—which would I grab first, which second which third? The first cake had to be not only flavoursome but capable of speedy ingestion, so as not to obstruct the advance upon the second My eyes must have glinted as eagerly through my expanded fingers as the eyes of a hungry rat gleam in concentrated purpose from the dark corner of a cellar at eating time

Too many had turned up for the insufficient provision There was a spate of sanctimony but a lack of comestibles And there were not enough places at the table for all The sponsors of the feast, with characteristic canniness, were not going to permit spiritual values to be buried beneath too much fleshpot And the Last were not First nor the First Last We were all arranged in classes, and when cakes and places seemed *insufficient*, the *least known* were detailed by the teacher for the second sitting We were the friendless, the patched, the greedy, the ill mannered, the outcasts We had turned the scale for the Reds, but we had no share in the triumph

"You sit over there and we will fix you up afterwards "

We sat We were spared no portion of the grace before meals It was as emphatic and thankful as the provision was meagre and Presbyterian It was pronounced by a "meeserable" drawler who drawled until the cups of tea grew cold He prayed his thanks to the "geeverrr" of good while we peered through our fingers at the cakes we would never pounce upon And the humbug must have been aware of the skimmed provisions Maybe he was attempting a miracle, trying, with Presbyterian humility, to make the fragments, not into the loaves and fishes, but into the forty basketfuls so that the bun-fight might yield a profit.

Awful night! There was no second sitting The cakes

vanished in about two minutes. The children at the tables were shabbily treated, the second sitting was absolutely swindled. The clan Porcello gazed upon empty plates and cups. We made wry faces. We knew unchristian rage. We cried inwardly. No attempt was made to send out and buy a few cakes and pastries. And it was a wealthy congregation in a well-endowed church with a comfortably remunerated "Meenister."

Blessed is the memory of the Salvation Army, for they understand how to run a bun fight. 'Hoch the Booth family' for they distended the paunch before they attempted to give the mind wings. Blessed is the Army for they grinned when I came three times in the pauper's queue for a bag of edibles. Blessed is the Salvation Army, who understands how to run a bun fight for juvenile bums and dead beats. For all their blatant faults they never mistake miserableness for holiness. A plague on the memory of the Holy Wilkes, who enticed children with currant buns and who sent them away hungry. For we were greedy, hungry, and ambitious, and they fed us not. There is a touch of the Charlie Chaplin comedy in that awful night. But the night was suitably concluded. Yes, very suitably. We sang the Doxology.

*'Praise God from whom all blessings flow  
Praise him all creatures here below*

I was possessed of the excited and agitated greed of a week, the cumulative appetite of anticipation. My glands had run with the rat's eye view I had had of the food I had swallowed a hundred lumps in my throat as those in the first sitting had pounced upon the food. And the more figurative lumps I swallowed, the emptier my stomach became.

*'Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

I had the exaggerated hunger of enforced and unfair denial. I quivered with greed and injustice. I had been cheated of the prodigal's inheritance and fain would have returned to darkness to fill my belly with the husks that the swine did eat. I



longed for the right to kick the Chief Holy Willie on his smug shins. Disconsolate, we went slowly home.

"There is no God," I said.

My brother refused to argue and grunted assent. We took a loaf of bread from the cupboard and had a slice of bread and treacle. Poor mother wept for us, and next day she bought us a bag of broken biscuits. She could sense the depths of our despondency. And I know what I said as we went to bed.

"Jesus," I said, "was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier."

But that frightened my brother.

"God might strike you down dead," he muttered.

"I don't believe in God," I answered.

And then as I lay on the pillow I grew afraid, so I prayed excuse for my blasphemy secretly.

"Oh, God, let me off this time! Oh, God, let me off this time!"

## **The making of the criminal**

TOWARDS the end of the year I spent in the fourth standard, I started to become outlawed from society by more than poverty. I became a thief. I had already stolen fruit from trees, but in children that sort of theft is not criminal. Pilfering from orchards is part of a great sporting game which many children play, just as puppies gambol with a slipper, and will continue to be played as long as there are orchards. I think stealing fruit from the tree will remain a great boys' game long after the production and distribution of fruit, which is so easy to grow, satisfies youthful appetites. Children, like the birds, the field mice, possums, see fruit on the trees as something to which they have proprietary raiding rights. Stealing fruit is a great social game. But I started to steal more than fruit.

My first serious essay was provoked by our circumstances one severe winter. Lack of money had driven me out to collect chips of wood and coal for the fire. There was no compulsion

from my mother about this, and my brother never followed in my footsteps. Collecting wood was a purely voluntary act on my part, my free contribution to the cheerfulness of the home. We were cold. We could not afford wood and coal. Very well then, I went forth as thousands of children have been driven forth to collect chips of wood round the timber-yards and waterfronts, to gather small fragments of coal along the railway line. We had to keep warm, and above all, I loved a fire and the right to stoke and poke the fire. Before my mother well knew that it was happening there was always dry kindling wood and a bucketful of coal in the house. Undoubtedly the coal and wood I procured eased our finances considerably. The absurd pride that caused me to sneak to school ashamed of cast-offs, did not affect the gathering of wood and coal, because dozens of boys went to gather fuel, boys whose parents were better provided for than the Porcello's. I was fortified by the approval of the mob.

After we had filled our bags we would gather to play. What a world it was to play in! We played hide and seek and kick-the-tin round the trucks and timber stacks and along the waterfront. Trains, ships, horses, goods inward and outward, there was variety in that world. We trapped birds that came to peck half digested oats out of dung, played leap-frog, sailed round pools on planks, broke windows with the careless use of the shanghai.

But gathering chips of wood and coal when no timber was being moved and no coal was being freighted was dreary work. Sometimes no chips or sticks lay around, and the railway sidings had been picked clean. Sometimes we played first, until there was no time for honest picking. And we all had a duty to our homes. I had, anyway. I grew loyal to the idea of myself as wood- and coal provider. To avoid the dreary work, and yet make sure of full provision, some of us would steal. We would throw down pieces from the full trucks and fill our sugar bags and clear out. Sometimes, in the gloom of the evening I would go to the timber yard and march off with a short board or piece of scantling. And once the habit developed, theft became easier than monotonous labour. Why spend hours gathering fragments when a few minutes stealing

large pieces would suffice to fill the bag. Other people had plenty. I wanted plenty as well. I became a courageous thief. I would fill my bag without hesitation in broad daylight, and march away. If the coal was plentiful and there were few workmen about it, I would fill my bag many times, and stagger home until my legs were weary and my back was red and sore.

I had no compunction about the act. That does not mean I discarded caution. I would look up the line and down the line to see that nobody threatened my freedom, and then I would work rapidly. And, unlike most of the boys who would only steal in company, once started I did not mind going alone. I could run like the wind, and, if driven off, I would not give up for the day but, rat like, returned again and again. This trait made me a hero, and the envy incited by my courage sometimes encouraged me to foolhardiness. It gave me the thrill of superiority, the joy of approbation. So I kept the home fires burning.

I was soon stealing more than coal and wood. Many of the boys had trolleys made for them by their parents to carry their wood and coal in. I had no method of transportation except my back. Wheels and axles cost money, and I had no money. I spied out the foundry where wheels and axles were made. I went alone through a broken window one Saturday afternoon. I stole a box. Soon I had a trolley. I stole boards from the timber yard and built a wooden hut for my gang in the backyard. I was a good thief but a poor plumber. When it rained the hut leaked like a sieve. I stole seven kerosene tins, plugged the holes, fashioned a raft, and drifted about on a bay until some bigger boys pirated my raft. I discovered that bottles, beer, pickle, sauce, were as good as coin of the realm, and that brass, zinc, copper, sacks, all these goods had a cash value. I spied out places from which these could be stolen, timidly at first, but with increasing boldness. My laudable efforts to keep the home well fuelled launched me in a criminal apprenticeship.

And I learned many things, learned a little about everything except sex. My life was too full of flesh-and-blood adventure to have time for sexual wonderings. I learned to swim. I dived from dizzy heights. Vanity and ambition forced

me upward to the highest diving boards, upon which I would stand, strange mixture of courage and cowardice I quaked as I poised myself on the tip of the high board But dive I did If I had climbed high to the ceiling in the full sight of the gang, I would have dived rather than have come down again, even if I were diving to death

I got work as a runner on a newspaper round, and all the family were pleased I was to earn seven shilling and sixpence a week for delivering two hundred and fifty papers each night I was hailed as a breadwinner A stream of wealth was to flow from my efforts I could see the newspaper job leading on to other jobs I would show them I would end up a millionaire Alas, my legs and arms were not strong enough to enable me to carry the papers I collapsed ingloriously under the weight I had boasted to my friends, and the defeat hurt Blank despair ousted vainglory

But my employer was a good chap, much better than I deserved he should be He sensed the tragedy of our home and he was sorry for me He carved fifty papers off the original round and gave it to me Two shillings and sixpence he gave me as my wages, and each week end I brought this amount home My mother gave me threepence I didn't demur A regular income of threepence was wealth a generous portion to a boy who only got a penny on some Sundays to put in the plate To many other boys, paper money was so much pocket money To our home it became an important portion of the weekly income I associated with the other boys in the paper office before my round commenced I arranged to meet them after the work was done I started to stay out late at night The other boys had more spending money than I I started to steal money, a few pence per day so as to keep pace with them My employer, an honest but careless and good-natured German called Himmell, was easy to swindle He liked and trusted me, and I traded on his trust

Staying out late in the streets at night altered the whole organization of my life I stayed out so late that I stopped reading and went straight to bed when I reached home I let myself drift Mother, already worried because of Rose's nocturnal life, was worried still more by my late home-

comings I always worried my mother most of all for she knew that of all I understood her troubles most and wanted to assist her. She worried silently, not caring to reproach me openly. I was bringing home two shillings and sixpence and keeping the home in wood and coal. I came in later and later, becoming a veritable gamin, who ran at the sight of approaching policemen.

Why was it, that at this moment school life which for two years had run smoothly, became beset with difficulties? It happened that my mind created a barrier between myself and the man who was to be my teacher. That drove me out of school. A teacher became a dreadful personal enemy, an incarnation of fearful qualities.

It happened in the fourth standard. The school year was almost at an end and we were about to be elevated into the fifth class. I had been acquitting myself well, although not with distinction, and school was tolerable. Our teacher was a good instructor of music, so one day he changed over with the teacher of the fifth. Saint Nick was to come and hear us at poetry while our teacher was to go and take Nick's class at singing.

"Old Saint Nick," who was around forty, was a great teacher of the old fashioned type. He had a class of ninety-six, and classes of that size compelled teachers to steam-roller individuality. Children did a sort of mental goosestep towards knowledge, a process which was satisfactory to the average child, but Hell to the exceptional one. The latter was stifled. Yet in his way, Mr. NicholSEN was the greatest teacher I have ever known. Saint Nick could drive but he could not encourage, and I could never be driven except to Hell. Anyhow, I was near the rocks when he drove me ashore. And yet when it was too late, Saint Nick had a greater sympathy for me than for anyone in the class. When it was too late. Discernment is not easy in a class of ninety-six. We started wrong and the drill master could never openly descend from his pedestal, so we finished wrong.

When Saint Nick came to our room he was reputed to be the most merciless teacher in the school. The playground became mannerly and the classroom grew silent when he

scowled. How he could scowl! Yet he was fair, for he drove the best as fiercely as he drove the worst. The boy at the head of the class could presume no more than the boy at the bottom. I know. I sampled both places. He wielded the cleverest strap in the school, and he added weight to skill. Some say that he never smiled. Yet God knows that when he sensed what was happening, he showed on rare occasions a gleam of sunshine towards me as though he knew my problems and my drifting, and wanted me to know I had his goodwill. But those gleams were secretive, and as though he were ashamed of his humanity. And storm succeeded blue sky so rapidly, that I judged by the usual and not by the exceptional. When I caught those gleams I looked beyond to the ominous black in the offing.

Saint Nick was the devil himself. He was dark, square-jawed, handsome. His smooth shaven, pale cheek was blue-black where the stubble rooted. He had a resonant voice that could convey his passion beyond the ears into the soul. He scowled at stupidity. He scowled at clever ostentation. He merely said "good" when work was excellent, but he poured out invective if work wasn't good. He had a gift of exposition. Standing by the blackboard he would have been a great power to make children understand, if he had not first made them afraid.

He came to hear us poetry and he became, as a result, a menace that loomed up in front of me for months. I was afraid when he first entered the room, but so was everyone else. We knew of him. We straightened at once to stark, inane attention, watching him as well mauled mice might watch a clever cat. The lesson was *Barbara Frietchie*, a heroic poem of the American Civil War. I used to think it a remarkable piece. I still do, for it has for me the statue of a mental landmark. *Barbara Frietchie* comes to me mellow with schoolboy associations. For I love the earthiness rather than the philosophy of poetry. I have been a vagabond and slept "where the shadow falls the deepest," I have gone up stony river beds in the hot sun to "where the grey trout lies asleep." Simple earthy pictures appeal to a sensualist where exquisite rhymed philosophy fails. The thrill that comes from recapitu-

lation of physical living is to me poetry's greatest miracle so the poems I love are the poems of infancy I love smells, murmurs of water, rustles of leaves, and even that despised "host of golden daffodils" These things remind me of days when one was so hungry that impression impacted on membranes uncloyed by food I can revel in the beetle wheeling his "droning flight," in the rhymed physical music of words as a savage does in the thudding of a tom tom, in the play on l's and s's So much in assertion of my tastes, in order to illustrate the shock of Saint Nick's blasphemy

The day Saint Nicholas came to hear us in poetry, I lost all confidence in my ability to work with him for the twelve months that were coming From that day, I sensed any effort on his part to secure my goodwill to be a snare and a trap, a means of persuading me to lower my guard that he might pounce Thereafter I always accredited him with sinister purpose For he wounded me He strangled to death the fairest vision I had ever had His gift of exposition evoked a dream, a vision He bade me gaze upon a crystal and see And above more than anyone in the room I gazed and saw and was enraptured, and then he dragged and jarred me back to *normality*, *raped the dream with his monstrous presence* What little things determine the destiny of our footsteps' For Saint Nick could enchant Sometimes the poet in him compelled the drill master to abdicate, and he took us for a jaunt on a magic carpet, but God help him, the drill master stood at his shoulder ready at a sign of weakness to dethrone the usurping poet And just as his steel blue and black presence could terrorize, so could it mellow for a moment and hypnotize into ecstasy

As he started to explain the poem he mellowed, and in a moment had gained my confidence The barriers of fear fell down I was off my guard The schoolboy and the teacher were washed out He was the man and I was the boy and a common interest bound us into one unit Boy and girl repeated line after line, and each line he explained What a morning it was' I see him by the blackboard, stroking his blue chin, hanging on to the words of each child His voice dominates, but there is no hard note of anger.

It was a cold, clear morning He enters There is a deathly stillness He is dictator by right of physical and mental power to intimidate, and not because his job makes him supreme.

"The lesson is Barbara Frietchie! Who was Barbara Frietchie?"

Eager hands are thrust aloft, the hands of all who wish to obtain goodwill But he refuses to select the first or the most enthusiastic

"Top boy " He will start at the top and work down. He is indifferent as to the pretensions of individuals He is teaching the class.

"Please, Sir, Barbara Frietchie was an old lady who lived in Frederickstown "

"Exactly."

We were off. He started to explain the poem so that the words lived and I lived too. So much did I live that my mind and my body escaped from the classroom into the poem. Alas, that was a truancy that was not outwardly apparent and that was mistaken for something else I floated out beyond the walls on the wings of my fancy. I was in the open air ; the fresh air of morning and the dew of grass was gathering around my feet and legs, and senses were feasting. Memory may be verbally faulty

*"Up from the meadows rich with corn,  
Cool in the clear September morn,  
The clustered spires of Frederick stand,  
Green walled by the hills of Maryland.*

*Round about them orchards sweep,  
Apple and peach trees, fruited deep,  
Fair as the garden of the Lord  
To the eyes of the famished rebel horde*

*On the pleasant morn of the early fall  
When Lee marched over the mountain wall  
Over the mountain marching down  
Horse and foot into Frederick town.*



I dreamed The school vanished Lulled by the explanatory inflections of Saint Nicholas's voice I forgot him too as one forgets the anæsthesia one is inhaling Frederick town stood out very much like any rural scene in New Zealand except that the scene possessed that magical aura that comes from fancy I saw the wet dewy meadows untouched by the rising sun, shut in by gorse hedge and willow plantation I saw fields of waving corn I was conscious of morning cool blue sky flecked with clouds, golden and red with dawning rays I heard birds twittering at that great hour of mystery I saw a ray come over the hills and change yellow corn into gold The clustered spires of Frederick town seemed very much like the spires of Presbyterian Dunedin, except that the town was smaller, easier to encompass with the eye and orchards came down the hills to the shadow of spires I saw more orchard than green walls on the surrounding hills—inviting orchards Knowing fruit hunger the apples to me were red checked ripe, sugary, hanging heavily, and there were fat goose berries, peaches, long pears like heavy bells, rows and rows and rows You see my poetry had a relationship to the sort of food I longed for The vision splendid could excite my glands And on the road tired but cheered at a sight 'fair as the garden of the Lord, I saw the famished men I saw them marching down the hills as I had seen men marching out of Dunedin to the South African wars How I remember that moment! It is one of the vivid moments of school life I was discovering through the exposition of Saint Nicholas that enchantment called poetry These men were not neatly buckled and garbed like troops going away to war They were tired with forced night marching, they were unshaven grimy, hungry They were at war, not going to war No one greeted them They greeted the fruit but no one returned the greeting They were invaders I saw slouch hatted Stonewall Jackson riding in front, stern, supercilious The column of route wound down from the hills into the streets of the town The vision splendid was mine as we possess it seldom in our lives I knew an inward miracle My eyes grew wet with ecstasy

Oh I saw it all, all, and I was all I was more than a poorly clad, tousled haired boy I was the universe I was the morn

ing, cool and dewy, with the blue sky cloud spangled I was the sun setting fire to some clouds and painting other fragments with gold I was the spear of light that made yellow corn iridescent I was the hedges and the trees and the orchards and the dusty road I was the fruit and the consuming appetite, I was the town I was slouch hatted, stern Stonewall Jackson I was each and every one of the tired, foot weary, fruit hungry men And by God I was the old crone, Barbara Frietchie, who leaned over her shattered sill and flaunted her flag in the rebels' teeth I was in harmony with all life, and I was all life I saw the blossom, felt moist dew upon each petal, filled my lungs with rising perfume My heart that was the world and yet that was enchanted by the world and all its wonders broke from monotone and throbbed along the dusty road in jaunty melody

And, unknown to myself, a threatening silence had descended upon the class Nicholas's attention had become concentrated upon me, and the attention of the class upon Nicholas My head was bent forward my eyes were half closed I slouched in my place seeing none of my surroundings How could I? I was thousands of miles and decades away in Frederick town And Saint Nick was contemplating my lounging form with amused pity He stroked his chin and the class held its breath as an onlooker awaits the bursting of an explosive charge And I dreamed No untoward sound, no warning nudge came to drive away the rhythm of rebel feet marching down coming with the sunlight to Frederick town I was the crystal gazer I was the seer of visions Such awfulness as was my lot might be the lot of a passionate, sincere lover caught publicly in the act of physical adoration How fearful such a happening could be how chilling and burning, how blinding and stark!

A hand held my shoulder and jarred me against the desk, cruel jar that left physical bruises A second hand slapped my ear a ringing blow I was hurt, I spluttered and gasped I came to physical pain and terror and out of my magical dream My face was stinging, and my mind came from the vision splendid to see that cruel face held close to mine, those piercing eyes examining me cold bloodedly

'Wake up! wake up! wake up!'

God help you, Nicholas You had unlocked the door to heaven and now cast me into Hell for stepping across the threshold into your heaven

"You're asleep"

"No, Sir "

"You're asleep"

"No, Sir "

How he bumped me against the desk

"You are asleep!"

"Yes, Sir "

"How dare you sleep when I am giving a lesson!"

He shook me, his face close to mine, and eyes possessed me as a weasel's might a rabbit's I was outraged and helpless

"What were you doing?"

"Dreaming, Sir "

Why did I tell the truth? How he snorted! How he raved! How he riddled poor dreamy me with his flashing wit! How, childlike, the children, fearing for themselves, enjoyed the cruel grueling he gave me! He unhanded me at last, but he had an afterthought He spoke to my neighbour

"Can you use a pin?"

"Yes, Sir "

Old Saint Nick took a pin out of his coat lapel and gave it to the boy

"See this?"

"Yes, Sir "

"Do you know what I want you to do with it?"

"No, Sir "

"Stick it into this boy next time he goes to sleep! Under stand?"

"Yes, Sir "

My neighbour was proud of the task The class smiled, but Saint Nicholas's grimness froze the smile on their faces It was his joke, not theirs And his jokes were meant to intimidate, not to amuse As an afterthought, Saint Nick fired a parting shot at me

"What were you dreaming about? Out with it!"

What a fool I was to tell the truth! Poor ass but what else would I say?

'Of Frederick town sir! Of Stonewall Jackson! Of the orchards and meadows! Of Barbara Frietchie

My answer nearly shot him down. He looked at me so very queerly and turned on his heel, he walked back to his place leaving me alone, although he looked doubtfully at me once or twice again. He knew he had blundered. I had that flash of knowledge long after. I thought he was only looking to see if the boy had the pin ready, so I sat in stark upright, inane attention. Above all, I had caught at the vision splendid and above all I had been wounded, left bleeding, my emotions had been raped. And Saint Nick made subsequent but not too obvious efforts to bridge the gap. And to him what a sacrifice even slight efforts meant! He sensed the barrier he had erected. In time I became his star pupil and dunce alternately. I hated and feared him more than any teacher, and yet in retrospect I think more kindly of him. He was a beast who trampled on me when caught in ecstasy. But he was a magician who invoked the ecstasy he outraged. He made fleeting efforts to secure my goodwill, but those efforts made me tremble the more, for I had lost confidence in his purpose. His very power to lift me imaginatively made me afraid lest he catch me floating beyond the walls.

So I was doomed in advance by my impressionability to resist his every influence. His impatience with stupidity led him to blunder. He was more personality than school teacher. If I had got to know him privately before I had been bruised and jarred I would never have played truant, for I would have sat at my desk and my truancy would have been mental and emotional. But I never knew when he would pounce, so that school had no escape for my vagabond fancy.

Years after, when my life was momentarily wrecked, Saint Nick found it in his heart often to draw my brother aside and make private inquiries about me. I was told of them twenty years after. Did Saint Nick have an uneasy conscience or did he have a regard for me? Certainly he retained a furtive interest. He told my brother I was the most disappointing pupil he had ever had.

Nicholsen became a menace for me for the rest of the year. At a time when it was important that I should be happy at school, I feared the elevation to the fifth School that had been a sheet anchor of sorts, suddenly became a place of terror. Saint Nicholas had me in a trap. I knew I was dreamy. I knew that stark attention would make the coming year seem a century. Escape was essential. I had been making progress. I passed my examination with honour. I had enthusiasm of sorts for my work and that without parental aid. My sun had been in the ascendant in school. The positive effort of school might have counteracted the criminal effort of wasted evenings. But Nick, like a giant shadow, stood in the path.

Nicholsen developed an affection for me too late. He wore it on his sleeve almost, though no one but I knew it. I, most of all, sensed the human something in him, and I knew mostly the beast. Behind the black scowl and chin was a human, but I had been chilled and daunted. No tragedy of youth exceeds the tragedy of a feared teacher.

## **The incompatibility of the temperament of Saint Nicholas**

AFTER examinations, I was reprieved for six weeks. The Christmas holidays intervened between promotion and the beginning of the new term. During those days, I trembled whenever I thought of the year that was coming, but I did not think of it too frequently. Children postpone problems by ignoring them until they knock at the very door. I lived unto the day. Being longer of leg I went farther afield to play and to steal. I searched out wash-houses possessed of saleable bottles. I filched odd sacks from the stables of trades-people. I wanted money, pennies for yellow backs. The latest issue of Dick Turpin became the breath of life; denial was suffocation. I stayed out at night with other paper boys and managed to steal an increasing quantity of pennies from my trusting

employer I have always been cursed with the fatal capacity of inspiring trust in people who know me I think I was attractive to look at if folk could look beyond my skinny arms and legs and poor clothes to my countenance And our poverty made my employer anxious to aid I remembered his generosity years afterward when it was fashionable to maintain that nothing good ever came out of Germany, for his name was Himmell My plausibility may have taken him in, for though the presence of strangers ties my tongue in the presence of familiars I can babble on

Beginning the new term with Saint Nicholas was contrary to all fears There was no immediate hostility on his part, although there was certainly a distrustful and hostile neutrality on mine For a moment indeed I attained dizzy scholastic eminences My writing lessons were used to adorn the walls, my diction, when I read, found favour in those critical ears, and my arithmetic was excellent We had gone from the realm of repetitive addition, multiplication subtraction and division to the kingdom of proportion with its call for the exercise of a measure of reason Problems which seemed difficult to most were easy to me Nick had the elements of a great teacher about him and seemed to understand that a rich imagination and an ability to express the content of that imagination in readable language was the sign of an educated intelligence After nearly ever lesson in composition I would have to endure the awful agony of having my intimate imaginings read aloud And how vapid these effusions seemed when read in that manner Some of the boys or girls could sit and express conscious pleasure at the merit of this reward but although I could feel happy climbing the highest tree or diving from the greatest height, exhibitionism of this order always seemed to outrage something deep within me To read one's effusions aloud was a process of mental stripping It exposed a mental nakedness that burned one up with shame I was a public performer at stilt-walking or imagining games or at varied accomplishments of similar order When my fancies in composition were exposed, I could not smirk and take the bow But how many books would be written if each word had to be read aloud in the presence of the author and his critics?

Nick always graded his class on composition. Write well, exercise the imaginative faculties intelligently and one shot up to the apex of the class. I often ascended dizzily, only to fall as rapidly.

Saint Nick never used the top of the class to shame the bottom. He drove the top the hardest. 'To him that hath much shall be given' was not his code, but "from him that hath' much shall be exacted. Maybe if he had not been overlaid with ninety-six pupils and cursed with the necessity of applying barrack square methods. Nick might have been a great teacher, achieving prodigies. He could lead whereas he was compelled to drive. Like one of his pupils, he was the creature of an impossible environment. He flogged top and bottom with abounding energy and impartiality, but he flogged for laziness and not, like many another teacher, for inherited stupidity.

No wonder I fell from grace, for he was convinced I was one of the lazy ones. I wasn't. I lived every moment of the day. I brought home the wood and coal of my own volition. I sold papers and cheated Himmell assiduously. I played late at night and read in each moment of spare time. But school was only a portion of my life. I was so busy at work and play that I neglected homework, unforgivable sin. Regularly I turned up in the classroom with nothing to show. And before the strapping, Saint Nick would brow-beat me into a confession.

"No work this morning?"

"No, Sir."

"Let me have a look at your book."

He would search and find nothing.

"You didn't even attempt to do the work?"

"No, Sir."

"Why?"

"Please, Sir, I don't know."

"No excuse?"

"No, Sir."

I had made every excuse. There are limits to ingenuity, and more severe limits to a teacher's gullibility.

"Out into the lobby!"

"Yes, Sir "

I used to flinch and wince when his strap circled and descended. Some boys squealed to lessen the punishment, but I used to try to show that I could take it. And it always hurt. That I could stand up to the pain of the strap with a show of vainglorious pride and yet squirm when my compositions were read out seems a contradiction. I suppose Saint Nick forced many an involuntary grunt from me, for he had both weight and science in his arms and I was scared of the dosage, but one had to simulate a don't care attitude before one's school-mates.

I received from Saint Nick what I had expected for the half year before. I also probably deserved it. He would smash down my determination. The fact that I frequently delighted him with classroom work rendered inexcusable my laxity at home. Nick was sure that I was lazy or indifferent. Often he showed my work to the Head on his morning perambulations, but he always tempered his exhibition. "And he's not trying." I really was trying, in school hours. So he set out to knock the cussedness out of me and, like a jibbing horse, the harder he leathered, the more I sat back. What I wanted was leadership to enlist my enthusiasm, not mere propulsion. I was full of the capacity for enthusiasm but it was expressed running riot in the city each evening, stealing pennies from Himmell to buy stale hot pies from Wright.

"You should be at the head of the class."

"Yes, Sir."

"Well, why aren't you?"

"I don't know, Sir."

"You do know. You don't want to be. Are you paying attention to me?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Lazy! Too lazy."

I could not tell him how industriously I stole and carried home the wood and coal. I could not tell him how speedily I delivered my papers to spend the stolen pennies on hot stale pies. I could not tell him I wasted the benevolent society's candles, reading yellow backs and penny dreadfuls. And I



could not tell him I was more uncomfortable at the head of the class than merged somewhere amid the fortunate mediocrities

True, nearly every morning I vowed to turn a new leaf And every night I hunted with the gang until the hour was too late And Nick could hurt verbally and in the application of leather And in the drowsy afternoon of a summer's day I was always coming out of a dream to wonder if he stood at my elbow with a pin It was the pin of the poetry lesson that made me for ever distrustful

One day Nick threatened unusually severe punishment if I came workless, so I solved the problem by not coming That was my first truancy after years It was pleasant And after one day's absence the menace of the wrath of Saint Nick was greater than ever, so I continued to absent myself Notes were sent to our house In the absence of my mother, I intercepted them In due course came apprehension, punishment, return to school

Mother left me alone She sensed the futility of punishment She sat up late and cried Her outlook at that time must have been bleak She had been so much away from home, slaving to keep the roof over our heads, that she had lost contact And the wall of deafness was shutting her further and further away We lived in a mental world which was foreign to her because she had no conversational interchange with us Deafness occasions as much confusion of tongues as Babel And if that wall had not been there, there was the barrier of physical weariness at the long end of the day So mother sat down and cried, and she wasn't of the crying type Her tears moved me, cut me to the heart I was the rotten cause I sensed the ruin of my mother's faith, the futility of her effort So I cried too I put my arms around her and said a religious "Never again" I meant what I said, while I said it

"Don't cry, mother I won't play truant again"

I used the same words on many subsequent occasions, always meaning what I said as I said it I practised no unconscious deceit But I was weak The last impression, not the best, determined the course of my footsteps Either I was weak or the forces arrayed against me were too strong I

returned to school a few weeks in arrears of other pupils Mine was a stern chase For a few weeks, I was the model pupil I came home and prepared my work I read stories instead of loafing around with the gang Some neighbour gave me an armful of tattered novels of the sixpenny variety, the accumulation of years, a considerable advance upon the penny literature They had been read and re-read, until tattered, dirty and coverless, but the content was no less palatable Guy Boothby, Max Pemberton, Leroux, Fred White, dozens of Nat Gould, exciting, thrilling reading they were for me I wonder if boys in aristocratic schools, compelled to cultivate the classics get a fraction of the sheer enjoyment or a great deal more of an education than I got from my mongrel collection These books affected my schooling again, for now I neglected my work for the enchantment of thrilling verbal spell binders I stayed up late to go up African creeks into slave compounds, to live alongside Dr Nickola's cat, to have "a presentiment of he knew not what" I chased pirates on the high seas I was marooned on tropical islands My senses were drugged to an oblivion of Saint Nick's leather thong

"No homework?"

"No, Sir"

"Out to the lobby I'll cure you of laziness"

But my compositions grew better, because I was a skilled juvenile plagiarist My reading grew more intelligible But soon I was again playing truant, and even Nick was abandoning me as an incorrigible, a presence not good for class discipline and, therefore, as well out playing truant And mother was mistakenly happy because she believed that I was adhering to my promise My brother, steady as a rock, as solid and reliable in school as he was unimaginative, refused to tell on me even when threatened by the teachers I played truant with a novel up my jumper I played around the harbour bays, the ocean beaches I roamed in the bush-clad hills I knew marine life, not its nomenclature, but its content and its quality I swam alone in the deep upper pools of the Leith I stole bottles and sacks to sell for pence I went to the wharveside and aboard the boats with their heterogeneous crews Yellow, black, white, red, all colours and races and tongues were occasionally there

I saw peanuts bananas resin unloaded I remember those three articles of commerce, for two excited my appetite and the third lent a professional touch to amateur gymnastic displays Wool and tallow hides, flax, timber all these one could play among as they were assembled for loading Winches rattled, blocks screamed men yelled slings went up and down Again I got the quality of geography while the better disciplined were at school learning its duller categories And sailors are as talkative as barbers and far more accomplished liars In their anxiety for an all believing listener they give the ears of very small boys respectful attention

Rose used to go down to the sea too, under the cover of night

I rioted in the Dunedin hills I lay face downward on long grass reading, and then I turned my eyes to ocean beaches where waves, rolling unbroken from Antarctica crashed The sea and hot coals are the world's greatest crystals for seers In the heating waves, I could see the story I had been reading I could exaggerate foaming breakers beating against the little rocky island off the beach into tidal waves crashing down on a tropical island That little piece of rock became the dream island of coral lagoon, of transparent water and swift silvery fish, of luscious fruits, of no school, no work, no wants and therefore of interminable happiness In those days, all the world of youth loved a coral island Why did not all adult humanity go to live on coral islands? When lying on my belly, steamers would appear far off the coast going North or South, and one had power to freight them with one's ambitious soul so that one went to Britain by way of Suez or Good Hope or Cape Horn

Sometimes, when I was reading a book about North American Indians, I would steal alone through the dense under-scrub of the hills and fancy myself a red man or a scout, thrusting branches away and stepping cautiously to peer at breathless danger The lonelier I was, the more crowded my dreams became The presence of prosaic minds was a curb to boyhood's magical clairvoyance And I stole bottles and sacks, for I wanted pennies And when discovery of truancy came, I promised again.

4 . 1

"Don't cry, mother, I won't do it again"

I made many fresh starts, but always fell back into the old ruts

But the coal and wood came home regularly, and if I stole pennies from Himmell, I never did steal my wage from mother. See how I grasp at the crumbs? Like other infamous outlaws, I claim that I robbed only from the rich. And mother, who had ceased to believe in Rose, was losing faith in me

I think I made saturnine Nick scratch his chin. I think he was at a loss to account for my fluency and sporadic brilliance. I fooled him. He thought I had talent plus laziness. He did not understand how much of the time I filched from his legal discipline, I spent reading and dreaming. I fooled that blue-black chin and added to the grey hairs in my mother's head. Imagination without healthy enthusiasms is more dangerously criminal than stupidity—aye, and more constructive, too. I knew what I was doing when I played truant. I was crooked because knavery and vagabondage were more pleasurable than honourable monotony. In time I crashed in a humiliating manner. I played truant on examination day and was doomed to a second year in Nick's class. But I did not care a great deal. Mother did, but she couldn't cry all the time. I blamed my failure wholly to Saint Nicholas and revolted. I refused to go back to his class. I got my way. I joined another school to make a fresh start.

What an easy year I had. I had not failed for incapacity but for truancy. In these modern days, ability elevates despite examinations. Education has grown more educated. I had a year's classroom loafing keeping abreast of the lessons. School was so easy that preparation was not essential. Most of the year I had a woman teacher who understood how to keep me alert in the classroom. Women teachers generally did. I don't mean that I was a pet. I never was happy enough to be that. Pets are full of confidence, and are rarely sensitive. But no one has ever succeeded in driving me, not even a barrack-square Sergeant Major. The school was of dwindling numbers, the class so small that the teacher knew every child. I think in that sort of school Saint Nick and myself could have bridged our gap. When my brother reached Nick's class and kept at the top

week after week with a plodding monotony, Nick used to humiliate him by telling him regularly that he was not as smart as his brother by telling him once in a revealing moment that I was in many ways the best pupil he had ever had. If I was he showed appreciation by flogging me more than any boy in the class. I failed with specimens of my work decorating the walls so my hide was tougher than Nick's determination. I would like to ask him why he commanded a boy to do sentry duty over my dreams with a pin as though I were a worm? Perhaps he thought I was that. But Nick like the Drain Pipe, was a great antagonist, and the war ended in stalemate which was failure for both.

## I was a thief

"You are a thief

What a chilling pronouncement that was. I can still feel my bottom lip trembling

'And there are no more papers for you to deliver

'No more papers?'

Can words reproduce the dismay that is at times reflected in the tone of the voice. The world was dark and everything was falling as it falls away in the application of anaesthesia. Except that there was no escape by falling into oblivion.

'No more papers?'

'No, you are a thief!'

No more papers. Mr. Himmell?

'Go away and tell your mother to come and see

'Go away and tell my mother?'

'Yes. I've got a boy for your job."

'For my job?'

'You are a thief.'

Himmell must have known I was that for some time but probably he had been unaware of the dimensions of my knavery. An odd paper, yes. For that he had made excuses. He was one of the good ones of the world, one of the people

who continue poor He was genial and forbearing, and though at last I wore down his patience and he kicked me out, he taught me long before any war that good fellows could be of German descent something it was human to know in August, 1914 I remembered the name Himmell when crowds were smashing German pianos and sausage and the windows of people born in that country

Himmell was good natured and easy-going He was, I believe, prepared to permit a moderate amount of theft from any youngster because he had been a youngster I think he would rather have overlooked a penny now and then than put himself to the disagreeable task of having a painful interview with a juvenile This is only my idea, and it may be in error Perhaps his artistic temperament was an obstacle to the conduct of his business For Himmell looked like the musician of the cartoon, hat, tie, general appearance He taught and repaired the violin, and tuned and taught the piano and may have played at times in the German band which, in Dundee, was largely composed of Scotsmen Music other than bagpipe music could not have been very profitable so the home fires were kept alive by the distribution of evening papers

Every evening at the conclusion of my round, his old mother collected my left over papers and the money I had received for cash sales Every Saturday she paid me my wages She was a stern old lady of large dimensions who gave me many a grandmotherly rebuke It was a sore point with her that I failed to cry my wares aloud Previous boys had advertised their entry into the street by yelling in that special way that is the copyright of paper boys on street corners But my voiced played queer tricks and had an adult resonance rather than a shrill, sky splitting, boyish treble When in the mood she would sit listening for me, ready with her admonition

"I don't hear you call the papers"

That was how she greeted me

"I call on my round," I would lie

"Not very loudly"

"Yes, I do"

But I didn't, I was a dumb salesman I could brave Nick's

leather, but I took fright at the sound of my own upraised voice I could steal, dive, but I was absurdly conscious of the failure of my voice to make the same ringing sound that other boys' made My voice was individual, as much out of harmony with what was customary as were my galatea trousers For which I can now offer praise But to be of the herd in those days was to know a sort of protective concealment A child at school had once achieved attention and commendation when we were defining the meaning of the word 'gruff' by reaching up a hand and calling my voice to witness "Please, teacher, Albany Porcello has a gruff voice" "Yes," the teacher had answered, "Albany Porcello has got a gruff voice" And I failed to appreciate the distinction Why I alone should be gruff I did not know The paper boys on the corner knew that I had not a shrill musical treble, but rather a deep adult tone How I envied those boys whose tones rose and fell in musical acclaim When I called "Star," I let out a deep, guttural syllable I am reputed to have a fine voice in range, vibrant quantity, and sound, its difference in these days evokes favourable comment But all I knew in those days was that it was comically different Other boys laughed when I said rather than sang "Star," although the teacher generally singled me out for clarity and force at reading When I called 'Star,' the syllable died in my throat. I hurried on shrinking inwardly at thought that someone had heard me and was laughing at my back I always made a determined effort to satisfy the old lady, but the reproof was administered regularly

She did not know what it was to be cursed with a gruff voice Sometimes at night when the news gang would gather, there would be vocal competition 'Sta—ar' Star here' Sta—a—ar'" Some voices would make the syllable a song, a thing of treble beauty that rose and fell above the roar of horse and pedestrian traffic I would stand in generous silent acclaim, a non competitor The boys would set out to persuade me, because my short, deep "Star" was comic relief I was the funny turn that had no intention of being funny, the vocal clown So I would set my lips and refuse

"You turn"

"No"

"Go on!"

"No."

"But we all have."

"No. I only call on my round."

"I don't believe you can."

"I don't care."

"Yell out and I'll shout you a stale hot pie."

So I was also the professional. The other boys sang as birds sing, from sheer delight of their beautiful rising and falling voices. I sang for stale hot pies.

"Star!"

Short, deep, sharp, as though I went at incredible speed for a few inches and then jammed on the brakes, out the word would come, a deep grunt proceeded by a sibilant. I would be shamed with laughter but, like girls and the sex business, it was indignity endurable for economic reasons. Stale pies are stale pies. No wonder the old lady admonished me. I was afraid of the sound of the paper name.

But on that fatal evening, Himmell was emphatic.

He had given me too many chances already. Had he not split a news round in two to act the part of benefactor, to give a poor lad a chance to earn an honest shilling? He had given me the chance and I had cost him many a penny. For first of all I had only stolen pennies, and then I had started to collect accounts and tell him they would not be paid until the next week. At first a sixpence, then a little more, until my round was composed of people in arrear. He had set out to help me collect money from people alleged to be owing, and he had gone from door to door being snubbed. I had been trying to go the pace with parvenus whose parents permitted them to spend all they earned.

Once he made up his mind, he wasn't afraid to hurl the word thief at me a dozen times in the crowded paper room. And other boys had had the same word hurled at them. Everyone in the room knew instantly. Everyone stopped counting papers to accuse me with their eyes. All eyes joined Himmell and said "You're a thief. You're a thief."

I backed from him in guilt and shame. My mind was paralysed. There was nothing to say. I had had my chances. The



world was falling piecemeal around my ears And a new boy at Himmell's side grinned at me

"Oh, Mr Himmell," was all I could keep repeating

But his face grew red and his voice pursued me as I backed stumbling away I had to go backward for I could not take my eyes from his threatening countenance I had outraged his generosity The artistic soul of the cartoon was on the rampage, hat, tie, hair that protruded

I turned at the head of the stairs and his voice came again to me

'Go to my mother She'll pay you more than I owe you

I went to his mother That was one occasion upon which she did not say 'I don't hear you call the papers She sat very still and she looked at me for a long time while I stood cap in hand, tears in eyes, examining the floor I pretended illness

"You are a bad boy You are a thief You will go to jail We have been good to you What have you to say for yourself?"

What could I say for myself I was as guilty as Hell and can never face guilt with a starched front I always manage to seem what I am I am not a brazen sinner merely a foolish one

'Here is your money Don't come here any more Tell your mother to come and see us '

I took my money and departed in distress at my misfortune What should I say to my mother? And my few shillings were necessary at home I would kill myself I would run away I could not face my shame But I took my wages home and handed them over I was silent about my dismissal I was afraid mother might go to inquire why I had been sacked I was silent because Himmell might intend to tell the police and they might call at any minute

'You are home early to night?"

"Yes, mother "

'Why are you so quiet? '

"I'm not quiet "

'Why don't you read? '

"I don't want to read mother "

"You look white

'I'm not white '

Every few minutes mother was concerned about her child that night

"You are ill?"

"No, I am not, mother

My faculties were merely in numbed confusion What could I tell? I feared her tears, not her wrath My few shillings had made me a little hero The goodwill with which I surrendered my wage equalled only the goodwill with which I stole from Himmell And I had been given to boasting Some day I would grow up and keep the home while mother rested from arduous labour And the hero had become the thief I should have made the confession on the first night, for with each successive night honesty was more difficult But I was afraid mother might see Himmell I flinched at sight of a policeman in the street for a few days too And as usual, I prayed 'Oh, God, let me off this time Oh God, let me off this one time '

On each evening I went away to deliver papers and I had no papers to deliver I hung around the streets out of sight of all newsboys for the story of my infamy had become common property among the other sellers But I had an inspiration I played truant from school and embarked on a career of theft I had to steal enough bottles or sacks to make up my wages And I did As a result of much mental exhaustion and physical alertness I made up the amount Thus to conceal one wrong step, I blundered in deeper and deeper And for two weeks I was a success in my new profession Out of stolen bottles came my wages

And then I failed I could not manage to secure sixpence Every time I essayed, something drove me off People with sacks and bottles were more careful after a visitation or two So when the next pay fell due I was afraid to go home I stayed out late I decided to stay out for ever Mother, brother, and sister were all alarmed They visited the police station to see if anyone had been brought in dead At Himmell's they discovered to their amazement I had not been working for weeks My absence caused them to despair And in the morning hours,

cold, subdued timid I crept home Everyone was tired and dreary with waiting and worrying and homecoming was easy for mother did not sit down and cry Grown almost hysterical by my absence, she gave me a severe punishing, leaving me bruised for days, but possessed of a sense of having paid for my sins But the crying came afterward My physical bruises gave me no emotional respite Mother stayed away from work all the next day, distracted and wondering what to do with me Was I to be persisted with? Some of her employers were counselling handing me over to the state I walked around glumly, trying as usual to comfort her

"Don't cry, mother, I won't do it again "

"But you will , you will , you will "

"No, I won t, mother "

My intentions were always good

We patched up our differences and started away again, but I don t think mother had much faith And after a few days had gone by, mother questioned me about the sacking In her distress she had forgotten a strange detail I had brought home money alleged to be wages

' You were sacked three weeks ago? "

"Yes, mother "

"Where did you get the wages you gave me for two weeks? "

"I don't know, mother " What else could I say?

"Tell me "

' I don t know

"Did Rose give it to you? '

"No "

' Well, where? '

"I don t know "

I could not tell that I was so very much a thief , I would rather have been burned at the stake There were conjectures, more bitter tears, and more facile promises

And when I saw Himmell coming along the road I fled from his sight His eyes seemed to be so accusing, and my back seemed to squirm as I fled I could in fancy hear his voice ringing in my ears, "There goes a thief " Thus really I shrank from the conscience that makes cowards Probably Himmell

never saw me as I fled. In time I met other paper boys and put on a bold face. I had to. I lied about past events. I could not go around branded. But the other boys were more concerned about the tricks my guttural voice played than about the money I had filched. Theft was a fair game and everybody's game, and I was not the first thief to be sacked. I had merely greedily overreached myself.

Mother got plenty of work which made good my lack of wages and my delinquency was glossed over. Rose broke from her world for a little while to earn what the world termed an honest penny. But like myself, she was doomed. The slave master was ready to step in again when long hours, poor wages, habit and the cheerless home created discontent. And the wall of deafness that kept mother from communication with us grew denser and denser until there was only monosyllabic conversation. She earned her money by the scrub brush and the wash-tub. My brother alone kept his honest feet on mother earth. The only evil in him was his love for his evil brother and sister. He had the criminal devotion of all bottom dogs.

## PART SIX

### A vagabond but not a peddler

I MAY have the inclinations of a vagabond, but I am no itinerant vendor of wares. I can peddle an idea, and, convinced myself, I can endure any rebuffs. Gifted with enthusiasm, I can win converts in the least likely place, but if I had to depend upon what I could sell from door to door for a living, I should starve to death.

Somehow I gained a respite from school, although why is beyond recollection. Either it was holiday time or it was thought that I should leave Dunedin for a few weeks to break me from some of my associations. I went to live with an uncle by marriage at a place called Mosgiel, a small industrial town close to Dunedin. This uncle was a rolling stone by temperament, and a hawker by profession, blessed combination. He was also sober and industrious, but like my blood relatives was cursed with the will to wander around. Being a bird of a feather, he was admirably qualified to marry a member of the clan Stuart. He roamed the country with horse and cart, selling fruit and smoked fish to farmers and villagers, making odd trips to buy bottles and sacks, bones, rags, scrap iron, and such materials. Sometimes, in the harvest season, he would spend a month gathering cocksfoot from the roadside and threshing out the heads, for in those days seeds of that grass brought a lucrative price.

We used to arise before dawn in order to cover huge distances in the trap and be on the spot before day had advanced too far. We would set out along the road while the country was stiff and white with frost, and we would have gone considerably, before sunlight chased the stars out of the sky. Horse travelling was slow and made the business day short otherwise. Victor had spent so much time looking at the heavens that he had come to know much of their geography. Driving early and late, watching the stars come and go, Victor knew their habits. Being talkative, he entertained me with sky lore. Each night and morning on the hard board of the jogging trap, as numbing cold air brushed against our faces and hands, we forgot the physical rigours of earth and explored the sky above.

That sky lore was later to enrich many an hour for me when, as a vagrant, escaping the police, I tramped from sunrise to sundown, sleeping under hedges and swaying branches or amid tall tussock. Many an hour I spent in after years on the broad of my back piloting my soul across the heavens. And on those trips there came the glory of a rural sunrise. The black, silver spangled velvet would grey, the flecks or streamers of cloud appearing as the brilliants vanished. I knew the stars that lingered, the constellations that winked the sun good morning. The hardy, poorly paid rural labourer has one compensation beyond all the human family who awake to wallpaper and ceilings. For he knows the sunrise. The red and the green and the gold and the white and the blue, and all the colours and blendings and shades, with at times a black patch before the face of the rising sun itself, a patch around which spills strengthening rays, these glories of the dawn are the lot of rural vagabonds. To stand or lie enchanted and open-mouthed—is not that the peak of physical adoration and wonder?

There was a tussocked hill I examined every morning about sunrise. My interest in the hill was my secret from even Victor, for on that hill grew a solitary pine. Hence the hill became "Lone Pine Hill." Every morning at dawn as a sunflower swings towards the light, so my eyes went towards Lone Pine. **Whichever way we went the hill was visible at dawn.** Sun rays

would top the hill and the slope of the pine would be enshrouded with morning vapour or black shadow To watch that piercing of those veils was a morning religious rite The light would strike at the mist on the tussocked slopes and out of mist or shadow Lone Pine would emerge and with the tree would go a dream I was ready for work when the tree was a tree once more and no longer a mystery For I liked to pretend that at nights a gang of picturesque outlaws, after enchanting nights by the cinders of fires made beneath pine branches, would be easily stirred and ready to gallop into a villainish swashbuckling life It might be that I looked every morning to see if the unshaven stalwarts had galloped off with my tree Although I never did, I could have told Victor, for Victor was a poet, and he would have heard feet rattling against iron stirrups, too He would have seen red cinder light shining in the tired faces of reclining men But I was distrustful of adults

Victor was a poet who hawked bananas and never grew rich for all his industry He could not settle down He was always moving on to fresh scenes and tasks With his jogging cart full of fruit, and an everyday readiness to be a good business man and trade in bottles or rabbit skins, there was yet poetry in his soul He would sit on his seat quoting and chucking to the horse.

*When all the world is young, lad,*

*chuck! chuck!*

*And all the trees are green ;*

*Gidap!*

*And every goose a swan, lad,*

*And every lass a queen ;*

*"Come out of that"*

*Then hey for boot and horse, lad,*

*And round the world away*

*"chuck! chuck! chuck!"*

*Young blood must have its course, lad,*

*And every dog his day*

*"Gidap, I say!"*

The iron shod hoofs would plop plop along the stones

Victor cherished ambitions. He composed odd verses on the side of a brown paper bag and committed them to memory. Why shouldn't a purveyor of bananas and smoked fish be a poet? He was a bewitched singer at the mystic hour of vanishing starlight, a prosaic business man when dawn topped the hill. The sprite gave way to the commercialist. Victor loved an audience for his own muse. He would murmur a verse and ask my opinion of it, sandwiching one of his own between a few lines of Kipling and the verse of a hymn. I would not know where the other ended and Victor started.

'What do you think of that?'

"Good. Very good." As a matter of fact it seemed as good as any other to me.

'You really think it good?'

"Very, very good."

"Who do you think the author is? "

"I don't know."

"I wrote that."

"Did you? Why don't you write a book? "

This was the uncle who was a poet and a Bottle Oh. But the sun would be up and he would plan the day. Poetry fled before the stocking of the basket. The poet emerged again in the evening, ventured forth when dusk was bringing out the rabbits and all manner of wild things, and again as we sat around the kerosene stove frying our evening chops or sausages, and boiling our tea. His face, with his sandy whiskers, topped by thin red hair, would gleam at me in the obscure light above his steaming pannikin. He would poise the chop he was picking, to declaim

*"That man to man the world o'er  
Shall brothers be for a that"*

He still lives, and more poorly. Riches have passed him by and he is left with rheumatics. He moves on, repairing umbrellas. He is dogged by poverty and misfortune, but can still challenge, "Listen to this verse."



My brother had spent several weeks in Victor's company before I was favoured with a turn. We worked the industrial town of Mosgiel on week ends and after pay days, going a long way out into the rural villages and glens during the week. When picnic parties came from Dunedin to the neighbouring valleys and glens, we were on the spot early. Young men with their ladies could be generous spenders.

Like many poets, Victor was given to superstitions. It took him a very short time to find out that my brother was the better salesman, practical, tough, unimaginative, and therefore not easily daunted.

'You are unlucky.'

I was unlucky. That was rapidly agreed upon. Whenever I canvassed a village or a picnic, our sales would be one half of what they would be when Douglas had assisted in the same village. My lack of success would react on Victor and dim his powers, he was impressionable for a Bottle. Oh, Oh.

If Douglas had been with me, he would have sold twice as much.

Conscious of the truth of the assertion, I never argued.

And I knew what Victor never knew. I knew that I was more than unlucky, I was incompetent. No salesman can sell against himself.

"I should be lucky. I was born on Hallowe'en."

'The night of witches.'

'So they say.'

'That explains the bad luck.'

Half humorously, half seriously, that explanation was accepted.

'Do you believe in ghosts and witches?'

Victor would tell a chilling ghost story with a conviction that left little doubt.

But I was more than unlucky. I could have divulged the reasons for my lack of success. I was simply not as other men and boys. I was too infernally shy to be a salesman. I could be daring in my thoughts but not on a door-step. When the lady came to the door and looked at me over the top of my basket, I was defeated before I mentioned my wares.

"No, thanks "

That phrase generally sufficed to defeat me At that point good salesmen stand their ground and go through their wares "Bananas, apples, oranges, figs, dates etc ' But when anyone said, "No, thanks," to me, the contest was over If I was given a chance to warm up, I could carry the day, but I had no ability to turn doorstep indifference into friendliness, to sell to hostile buyers

"Don't run away," was Victor's advice ' Tell the lady at the door all you've got "

I could not force anything upon anyone Sometimes after a long succession of failures I would steel myself and stand firm and manage a sale, but I would break away after an effort of that sort, feeling unclean and indecent And the mental and nervous effort involved to conquer my repugnance was enervating Generally I approached the door as though I were a crook

"Any fruit to day, lady?"

"No, thanks "

I would turn away rapidly, and hurry down the path to get out of the lady's sight

I had no combativeness whatsoever Knowledge of my own inferiority exaggerated the evil And even when fortune was smiling, I would dodge certain houses Houses seemed to have personalities, and I would walk past windows that seemed to frown and intimidate, and thus ignore prospective good customers And if a person stood at the door on the veranda I could never walk through the gate under the eyes of that person I had to reach the door by stealth in order to brave the inhabitants If a woman was critical of my wares, I could fight back, but if she said "No, thanks," I vanished Why did I lack the self-assurance that conquers sales resistance? Every householder says "No, thanks," automatically when a hawker knocks on the door Sensitive hawkers starve and the bold fellows sell goods to people who are poorer and more sensitive than themselves

But that was not the end of my failure I loved fruit too well I had the fruit hunger of a decade upon me I ate too much

I failed to produce a profit and I ate into the capital. The poet was taxed to supply my appetite. And a hungry boy with fruit is a bottomless pit. "Yes, you are unlucky, and you eat my profit."

That was a perpetual verdict. But at twilight and early evening, when we had left customers behind and were jogging along the road, with the stars and rabbits peeping out, and when Lone Pine was vanishing, I was the poet's finest audience. For the poet came out of the business man like a rabbit from a burrow, and our minds soared.

"What do you think of that one?"

"Marvellous."

"Do you know who wrote it?"

"Kipling?"

"No, I wrote that."

"It's pretty good."

"You're good company on the way there and back. It's a pity you're unlucky during the day."

Yet with that complete disregard for reality which at times afflicts the ambitions, I determined to save up so that I could buy a horse and cart and go hawking when I was a man. If I had done so I would have camped by the first stream to lie on my back dreaming and eating all the capital.

## Smart boy wanted

WHEN I had passed out of the fifth standard, I had the necessary qualifications for securing work in a factory as an apprentice or as a message boy. For a few weeks I attended the sixth standard and then revolted. Force or suasion were powerless to produce any effect, and the teacher did not fight to retain my attendance. I set a bad example for the class by my sporadic attendance and by my refusal to do homework. The teacher probably sighed with relief when I had the good grace to stay away altogether. The teacher was not to blame.

He could not turn from attention to a large class to worry about a hopeless recalcitrant, especially when every prior effort had been nullified. And I was a nuisance in school when I grew interested, for I floated out beyond the walls on a dream. When the class read a history book which I had read and re read in the first weeks of possessing it, I took refuge from monotony by making puppet show with my fancy. Real Kings stepped down out of the book and held royal court on the desk in front of me, Kings were cast in my own fancy who died with a smile on their lips when sinister figures clad in black tights whirled headmen's axes. Armies marched and horses pranced and guns detonated, and the earth shook with reverberations of man and beast and gunpowder.

When the lesson was geography and boys and girls spoke of countries that produced gold and diamonds, coffee, cocoa, wool, timber, manufacturers, instead of writing all these words down against the third degree that was coming, I saw all these things, not as words to be remembered, but as things, as commodities being unloaded on wharves from ship slings, with a screeching of blocks and rattling of steam windlasses and a yelling of unshaven sweaty men of multifarious shade. True, if the teacher opened up some fresh matter, I grew interested, but the moment I was compelled to focus my interest upon categories of disembodied words, I was gone.

In the sixth I became an amazing dunce in some subjects, and yet in reading, writing, drawing, and composition I held my own so much so that the teacher was often at a loss to account for the achievement of the dullard. And of course the real explanation was not obvious.

"How did *you* manage to write that composition?"

"I just wrote it, Sir."

"Sure no one else helped you?"

How that question always inflamed me!

"No, Sir."

"Well, why are you dull in other things?"

"Don't know, Sir."

I couldn't say "I don't care, Sir," which was the real explanation.

‘Nor do I’

So I passed from the school unhonoured. My school attainments were a wide knowledge of cheap and miscalled trashy literature. For that kind of writing led towards an eventual self-culture, providing reading that was worth all school educations, except that school disciplines and relates boys and girls to the art of working for a living. But if I passed out unhonoured, I was not unenthusiastic. Overnight I swelled to self-importance. The world lay at my feet waiting to be conquered. All I had to do was to go in search of work, and with my industry the boss would soon pass me upward over the heads of sluggards, and I should be envied and rich at an early age. I would fight my successful way upward like the hero of one of my paper-covered books, spectacular and undaunted. I would press on to the heights. Am I the only clown who ever sang such an “excelsior”? I, the boy who was too shy to sell a bag of bananas at a door, I would be a millionaire.

My mother was as apprehensive as I was confident. She had visioned success at school for me and I was a failure. She had few illusions left, only her love. I had made such a mess of everything that she doubted. Cocksure, I reassured her.

“Don’t cry, mother. Some day I’ll save my money and take you to Scotland to see where you were born.”

I was as sincere in my anxiety to bring money home to my mother as I was cocksure of success. I wanted to be a helper. I wanted to give mother respite from the wash tub with my earnings. Out of the prospects of my future earnings, we incurred debt. A new suit of clothes was bought for me on time payment, that boon and curse of the poor, for if it affords the only means of buying it exacts the heaviest rate of interest from the poorest customer. With guidance and no economic compulsion my haste might have been stayed until a decent job was offered, an opening in some sphere where opportunity would develop with service. Under such circumstances what might not have happened? It is pleasant to trifle with the possibilities of. If——”

The truth is that I would have found any regularity and

discipline impossible The only discipline to which I have ever been amenable is that discipline of self which comes when one serves with conviction, and I had to be chastened many times before I acquired that

"It's all right, mother Don't worry I'll save and we'll go to Scotland "

The whole world lay at my feet when I donned my new suit "The streets were paved with gold" I went to apply for one or two good jobs, and when I saw the little group of boys gathered my boldness vanished I stood on the other side of the street, and waited until the last boy had presented himself and then took my turn Half a dozen times I was thus too late I have never had the arrogance to scramble for a job at the head of the queue

If I could not immediately find work I did not neglect the home While unemployed I set out to pile up wood and coal I stole timber and chunks of coal furiously to show how industrious and worthy I was It was summer, and in a few days I had a six months supply stolen transported and stored up I brought some of my mates to rest envious eyes upon my handiwork I spent hours sitting on the back step reading, and raising my head occasionally to appraise the pile and flatter myself in the same way that an amateur gardener will spend a tired but happy hour peering through the window at his fresh, newly dug garden My brother was astonished at my assiduity, my brother who never played truant, never bottomed the class never stole bottles to sell, never dreamt of bringing home a stick or a piece of coal in the bitterest winter Incidentally, I never expected him to never attempted to persuade him I seemed charmed and fascinated by his respectability Maybe foraging for wood and coal was penance for my sins

"What do you want all the wood and coal for?" he would ask

"Get a good supply before I go to work "

"You don't need to "

"Why not?"

"The money you earn will buy wood and coal "

That was a flattering brotherly sentiment.

"I will not have so much to give mother. Will you get the wood and coal?"

"I'm not going to steal."

"I shall keep the house going in wood and coal for years."

Probably I would have eaten that promise in due course if the law had given me time, but it had a heroic ring that day. There wasn't much work about, and mother grew glummer as day succeeded day. Douglas and the neighbours grew critical. It was a time when shopkeepers did not rely on newspaper advertising as much as they do to-day. They merely hung out a notice "Boy Wanted" and the news spread. I perambulated the streets looking for such a notice. Message boys were in demand before mechanical transport came along. One day I found the card outside a boot shop.

#### SMART BOY WANTED

That was me.

"Ever been at work before?"

"No, Sir."

"You don't smoke?"

"No, Sir."

"We want a message boy."

"I can run messages."

"The wages are seven and sixpence a week."

"Yes, Sir."

"When will you begin?"

"To-day."

"Wait till I sack the other boy!"

God knows what criminality the other boy had become involved in, but the announcement was a shock. The man called the other boy out and told him.

"You're sacked. I'll pay you in a few minutes."

"I don't care," the boy replied.

"Sacked for giving cheek."

"I was going to leave, anyhow."

Why had I none of that boy's assurance?

"You see what giving cheek does?" the boss asked.

"I don't give cheek, mister."

"See that you don't."

I was sent out at once on an errand. The man informed me that I could go home for the day when my parcel was delivered, but ordered me to be at work at eight in the morning. I almost ran with that parcel, my heart singing a song of joy. When the errand was completed I ran home, excited and elated. In the home there was great joy. My first job. Wonderful, glowing prophecy greeted me. I was a hero in my own right.

"Learn the business and buy a shop," was my brother's advice.

"I think I shall," was my modest answer.

11

## The misery of bo

THE boot shop was located in an arcade that had once been the show and fashionable shopping place of the city, but in these days it had become the abode of the tawdry shops which sold gimcrack. As in all shopping places in a state of decline, the sense of defeat was expressed in the soul and countenance of the shop proprietors. The shopkeeper for whom I worked had retained his shop from the great and profitable days of the area and was now distressed to find business perishing all around. The air of the Arcade was gloomy and sunless, the voice and the footsteps echoed except when the thoroughfare had many shoppers. Cheapjack enterprises, Chinese fruiterers, pawnshops, which always cultivate a measure of obscurity, were ousting legitimate enterprise. There was even a purveyor of certain drugs and appliances for men and women.

In the morning when I appeared I found a young man outside awaiting the arrival of the boss.



"You're the new boy?"

"Yes."

"Ever had a job before?"

"No."

"Take you a long time to make a fortune at this job."

That was a cold douche to a boy full of enthusiasm arriving to conquer the world through a job in a boot-selling emporium. I had arrived for the particular reason the young man denied could be served—to make a fortune. Seven and six per week for carrying parcels was the ungrudged prelude to the acquisition of great wealth. I had worked out the number of pairs of boots which were worn in the city of Dunedin and I had visioned the day when all the dour city would be shod by Porcello. From a message boy for boots, I was about to move towards parvenu splendour. I had a song in my heart and the world had echoed my hope. The ring of my hobnails on the pavements had emphasized the rhythm in my soul. Through boots I should journey to glory. Boots were solid, respectable necessities. To me, at times, they had been even luxuries.

"Take you a long time to make a fortune at this job."

My unbelieving face smiled. He was joking.

"Eh——"

I sought a repetition.

"No good looking for your fortune here."

He was disillusioned. Once he also had hastened.

"Why?"

"Boys never stay long."

"Don't kid me."

"No message boy ever stays longer than a month."

"How do you know?"

"I've been here two years."

"I'll stay here two years, too."

"One month!" He was positive, and the stolid, humourless certainty of the prophecy filled me with alarm.

"I'll stay!"

"This is the dullest job in Dunedin for a boy."

"Why do you work here then?"

"Can't save up enough to leave and find another."

"Is the boss mean?"

"The missus owns the shop and she used to sell more boots when times were better."

The boss arrived and let us into the shop. I hurried to assist in carrying out the boots that were exposed on the stand outside in the middle of the Arcade. The job seemed all right to me.

H. G. Wells once wrote a pamphlet on *This Misery of Boots*. A very different pamphlet could be written with the identical title. My ambition sickened with the assuredness of the young man's prophecy on that very first morning. My dreams fell from the sky. "From Message Boy to Proprietor," which fitted in with the happy endings of my literary progress, became a phrase with a venomous sneer as it had been one full of rosy hope. Perhaps the young assistant was interested in moving on all possible contenders for his job. We live in a tooth and claw industrialism.

As we carried, every shop in the Arcade sprang to life, and stall after stall was erected. The shoddy and the cheap were displayed on the stall; the better grade article reposed in the shop windows. The proprietor was small, lean, sallow. Years spent inhaling the odour of boots in a gloomy shop on a covered street had made him weak-chested. The assistant informed me later that he had been married by the proprietress after her first husband died because he knew the business, and she got more out of him as manager and husband and for less money than he cost as leading salesman. The young man also assured me that he, the proprietor, wanted to retire so as to live in the sunlight and dig his garden instead of his grave, but that his wife loved money. He may have been a puny specimen, but the young man's sneers seemed unnecessary. The weak-chested boss seemed heroic to me after the recital. To marry the woman that owned the shop, to have a business, enough money on which to retire, that was success.

His desire for his home must have been a choice of evils for the proprietress was plump, fallow and also dull She reeked of boots She balanced the cash and sold in the ladies' department when there was a press of customers Maybe the boss wanted to shake both his wife and the shop off one at a time

So my working career commenced as message boy in a shop where there were few messages to deliver Sometimes days went past without one errand The customers were working men and women accustomed to carrying or wearing their purchases away Long before I worked in a bootshop I learned that poor people with one pair of boots could not afford the stitch that saves nine Poverty enforces such extravagance Trade was in the doldrums, and only about once a day was I given a parcel And I was energetic, conscientious, and anxious to demonstrate my suitability I wanted to bustle and fuss Since I found no work allotted, I ran after the boss, much to his annoyance He wanted a boy who could stay around and yet stay out of the way until he was wanted Gloomily he allotted me unnecessary work to keep me from pestering him "Dust the boots on the shelves "

I sprang to the task There were shelves and shelves and shelves and shelves of boots shoes, slippers, sandals The variety, to one who had known only split kip boys boots, was a revelation There were kip and split kip, tan, chrome, calf, willow calf, glacé, elastic sided Romeos, with poor varieties loose, the good boxed I would show how boots should be dusted I went down on my knees along the bottom shelf dusting, arranging, rearranging, so that when my work was examined it would satisfy every scrutiny Actually no one cared whether my task was well or ill done, but I was unaware of the unimportance of my services I filled my lungs with the odour of leather There were boots enough to keep me busy for days and days I worked up the wall breast high, head high, securing a ladder for the uppermost tiers No one cheered me onward, no one muttered a word of approbation, no one even noticed me I was proud of my industry and all the world was indifferent By the time my head was up near the ceiling I was sickened by the monotony of meaningless

work Dull repetition in that silent, gloomy hole had stifled aspiration But on I went The task finished, I chased the employer for more work sure there were brighter jobs to be done

"What shall I do now?"

'Dust 'em all over again

I realized that my services were despised but I started again, chasing non-existent dust There was only an odd foray into the sunlight The owner and his wife shuffled around silently, and even the sales seemed to occur with the minimum of talk Poor people generally have their minds made up when they cross the threshold I dusted Outside around his island of boots the assistant walked with a feather duster in his hand, round and round the circle The more diligently I applied myself the less I was noticed It took a cough or a dropped pair to make my presence felt Boot boots boots I extracted them from shelves dusted returned them I dusted boots until I could see nothing else waking or sleeping I visioned the future as a long avenue of undusted boots that reached from horizon to horizon I could see myself dusting boots until my black hair was greyed with the passage of years Until they have been worn boots are the most expressionless objects in the world I sniffed the odour of boots at meal times When I sat down to read at night I saw boots on the written page I had been caught in a trap I longed for fresh air, sunshine, the hard sand of beaches but all I achieved was boot dusting, boots laced buttoned elastic sided Sometimes in a whole day all that was said was Good morning Carry out the boots "Carry in the boots Good evening But I stuck to the job and for a second time I worked my way up and scraped the ceiling with my head Sure of a change I essayed again

'What shall I do?

'Eh, what?

'What shall I do?

Dust the boots again

I was caught in a damned circle of useless work I dusted shelves skirting boards so that not a fleck would settle but I swooped upon it And there was never anything to show for

diligence The shop seemed to grow dingier and gloomier as I went ahead I snatched a parcel as a trained retriever grabs at a thrown stick "A parcel for——"—that made my pulse beat It was thrilling escape from my job The farther away the owner of the parcel lived, the better. Yet, anxious to prove trustworthy, I made haste and hustled back in the shortest possible time My desperate willingness troubled the sallow proprietor The sight of my everlasting general post at the boots on his shelves, all unnecessary, caused him to fret Maybe he saw with horror the prospect of my wearing the footwear out with my duster If a customer tired on half a dozen pairs, no sooner was the sale made than I would descend from my ladder, pounce on the unwanted boots, return them dusted to their boxes, place the boxes back on their shelves I robbed my boss of the little tasks that enabled him to temper the monotony He twiddled his thumbs unappreciatively At last my energy brought about a revolt

"Leave those damned boots alone! I'm sure you're putting them in the wrong boxes."

Crestfallen I went to the dusting cycle Boots In my dreams they were confused by the insistent, irremediable perversions of dreams I put the two right or the two left feet in the same box. I got shoes and boots elastic and buttons, calf and kid, mixed in the wrong boxes They were never right But my employer, once revolted, was not to be subdued again

"For God's sake stop dusting those boots, you'll wear them out," was his pitiful entreaty

"You told me to."

"I'm telling you to stop."

"What else can I do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yes, nothing." But he had an inspiration "Dust the boots outside in the Arcade."

I sallied from out the shop dungeon with great happiness Thus the boss foisted his problem on to his assistant

"What do you want?" demanded the young man with the feather duster.

"I've come to dust your boots "

"No, you don t, ' he jealously asserted It was his dust and he was prepared to go to the stake for it "There's no dust here. You'll want my job next ' "

"But the boss says

"Did the boss say they were dusty?

"No "

"What did he say? "

"He told me to stop dusting the boots inside and to come out here "

I started in on the stall

"You're making a mess of my stall ' "

"I am not

"You are Talk back to me and I'll kick you in the back-side Put those boots down! "

I was at a dead end, forbidden to work inside or outside, and afraid of being caught loafing I fell in alongside the young man and walked in the circle with him, round and round the gloomy island of boots I kept walking whenever he paused to talk to customers Round and round like men on an exercise march behind prison walls, round and round for days on end because there was nothing else to do If I had touched a boot inside the emporium with a duster, the boss would have yelled with rage and the young man would not let me usurp any of his precious work My industry was accursed And doing nothing but marching in an aimless circle or up and down was duller than dusting If I had gone off to an obscure corner of the shop with a book that would have been resented too I trailed at the side or the heels of the assistant, who wore his feather duster as though it were a sergeant's cane, a baton of eminence

Sometimes the pawnshop on the corner yielded a rare moment of fun The town was full of Jewish pawnshops Poor, grubby people down on their luck, hardened crooks, respectably dressed citizens would come along with a parcel under their arms About fifty per cent of them would come out with the parcel still under their arms, hot and shamed at the professional hardness and indifference of the pawnbroker. the

honest looking like swindlers who had tried to rob a poor pawnbroker of his hard earned cash A good proportion of the successful ones would head straight for the nearest pub Pawnshops and pubs in those days had much in common

I trailed after the young man, pumping him with questions Soon he found my persistence obnoxious, too At first he had been the happy oracle Pumped dry, he rebelled When I got over my shyness, I found out where he had been born, his brothers and his sisters, his religion, his future prospects, how much money he was paid, what he read, which was nil, and whether he was ambitious to own his own bootshop It was always that way with me First a pained, tongue tied shyness, then a questing that grew bolder and bolder finally a challenging of oracular opinion And with the assistant first a talking down to my level, then a growing annoyance as my persistence and my memory played hell with his romancings, finally an open revolt I tried to reconcile his poverty with the wealth he assured me his family had, and his interest in the whores who came to the dingy shop next door, with the beautiful girl who loved him with flattering and open handed familiarity Where the evidence conflicted, I was hot on the trail So it was we started in the silence of timidity, and at the end of a few days we marched around and around again in a silence that was hostile And then he chased me from his territory

"Get out of this I'm tired of you "

"What for?"

"You are out here spying on me "

"The boss won't let me in the shop "

"I'll kick your backside if you stay here "

That had the ring of pained definiteness

"What can I do?"

"Go into the basement and sit down "

"I'm not allowed to "

"Other boys loafed down there "

"Honest?"

"All of them "

That settled it The basement was a change I marvelled

at once that I had not dared the basement before. Down there we had a cobbler whom I had never seen before, although I knew of his existence. He came in the rear way each morning and his bench faced a high, cell like window that looked out on to a back lane. The country fell away behind the shop. Craftsmen are always points of ideal interest to idle boys. Boys are imitative, and like to exercise their hands rather than their wits. The cobbler wore an apron and had black waxed fingers. He generally had a mouthful of nails or tacks, filthy habit of those days. Sometimes he grew lonely, too. And he was happy to greet me.

At once I became attached to his company. Spontaneously, I developed the ambition to repair boots. It would not require too much capital. A knowledge of the trade, a few tools, a side or two of leather, it was all so easy. Once more life glittered with prospect. Anyone could be a cobbler. Therefore I would be a cobbler. I would work for myself. Albany Porcello, Boot Repairer, Work Neatly Executed. Prices Reasonable." I could see the shop, the tools, the side of leather by the door, a crowd of people with paper parcels or unrepaired boots waiting at the counter for my estimates. If I had sunken to the basement I had been re-elevated to the grand heights.

The cobbler was skilful, and spat a nail or tack off his tongue and drove it in so dexterously that the moment I arrived home that evening I got a hammer, an old boot, and a packet of tin tacks to try my hand. But with a boot wobbling about on the end of a two by four and a carpenter's claw hammer I found my thumb an easier target than the nail. The cobbler talked as he spat out tacks. Our conversations were well punctuated. "Good morning. Spit, the hammer would drive the nail home."

"Good morning," I would reply. I sat enjoying craftsmanship vicariously.

'Ever swallowed any?'

I was ambitious. I wanted to go through life with my cheeks bulged with sprigs, hobnails, brass tacks, using my tongue as a mechanical sorter.

My interest and generous appraisal of his skill was



flattering. I tidied up the basement for him. I rearranged the spilt tacks. But mainly, I watched like a cat, but hungry to steal his job instead of his flesh. And at the end of a week, I had asked the cobbler more questions relating to his profession than he had ever been aware of previously. He was reduced to a state of nerves.

"Why can't you loaf like other boys?"

"Don't I?"

"You're restless even when you sit down."

"What other boys were different?"

"You'd better get out."

"Get out?" It was unbelievable.

"Yes. Get out."

"Where shall I go?"

"Get out!"

"Where?"

"If you stay you'll have me swallowing the hobnails."

I grinned. He was in earnest, but my laughter appeased him. One day he paused to talk, and missed his thumb by a hair's breadth. I exploded into laughter. I was thrust out of the basement forcibly.

I returned to the Arcade to loop the loop, and the assistant found me good company after my basement vacation. But the fortune to be won from boots and the trip to Scotland with my mother seemed less sure. I hated the shop and the people in it, and entered the Arcade each morning as one would a morgue. The only bright moments occurred when a parcel was to be delivered. Yet every trip only increased the gloominess of the return. But I took every penny piece of my wages home each week-end and I never squealed.

"How do you like the job now?" That was a regular brotherly query.

"Fine."

"Fine." "Good." "Not bad." I could only talk about my work in syllables now. I couldn't see myself growing rich from selling footwear, and I could no longer romanticize.

"You'll stay a long time?"

"For years and years, I told my brother dismally  
Years and years in a gloomy dungeon where the voice and  
the feet echoed, where there was no hope I was a heroic liar  
"And what will you do when you are a man?"

"Start a boot shop"

Perhaps I said just that If I did may the saints forgive me!  
I never loiter in a boot shop even in these days, the smell of  
boots nauseates me I enter with my mind made up by some  
ticketed window model I buy and I get out "Start a boot  
shop" It sounds like the slamming of the door on a twenty-  
year jail sentence

My industry and intense desire to know caused me to be  
disliked Bovine placidity was the asset I needed and lacked  
The assistant solved the problem with a completeness that  
lost me my job

"Stay away Go for a walk Come back now and again to  
get the parcels You won't be missed

At first I ventured away with excessive timidity then with  
growing boldness

"Any parcels?"

"Stay away longer You know there is only about a parcel a  
day" So compulsorily I played truant going farther and  
farther away Life became tolerable but I was conscious of  
the futility of my job It was meaningless, I didn't know how  
to break the knot, and the seven and six were needed in the  
house Set to work wasting time, I soon had the drifting  
mentality of the truant Idle hands and dull hours spelled  
danger The wharfside not far from the Arcade, dominated  
my interests I boarded boats I watched watersiders at work  
I yarned to sailors I came back on the run One day a  
garrulous sailor found in me his lifetime's ambition—a hungry  
listener, an ideal all believing audience He held me spell-  
bound in the exaggerated wonder of his travels The work day  
was nearly spent when I ran to the shop

#### SMART BOY WANTED

The card was hanging outside the door when I came back,

and the sallow proprietor showed an expression of glee! I triumph. Something had happened to break the monotony. Righteous wrath demanded the slaughter of a fresh innocent.

"Where have you been? I have had the messages ready for you all the afternoon. I had to get someone else to run the messages."

I was crestfallen and humiliated. The assistant grinned, winking towards the card on the door. Serve you right, his demeanour implied. "I'm glad," his lips seemed to say silently. The card was still up when I returned the next morning for my pay. I received my pay but no notice of impending dismissal. I made no comment until my hand closed around the money.

"You've got the card up."

"Have I?"

"Do you want a boy?"

"What's that got to do with you? I'm running this business."

"You want a boy though, so I'm leaving now."

"If you leave before I get a boy you will have to hand me back a week's wages."

"I'm going before I'm sacked."

I ran. That was the solitary victory my first job yielded. I went home sullen and despondent. That night my brother had to be curious. He had been fascinated by my three half-crowns. "Will it take long to save up and start a boot shop?"

"Not very long when my wages are increased."

"When will you get an increase?"

I changed the painful subject.

## **Renewed hope**

BECAUSE of stupid vanity I foolishly concealed my defeat from all at home. How could I return from the shop of which I had painted such glowing prospects to tell my family I was sacked? I had been too extravagant in my prophecy. Ready

ears had been compelled to listen and my enthusiastic utterances had been believed. My lies always find me out, for they attract so much attention that they are never forgotten. All that week-end at home, I was in a state of unrest and despair. If I sat down to read, the page blurred. One question demanded an answer, paralysed my nervous system. Where would I get the seven and sixpence for the following Friday night, since I had no job? But when the decision was made, my mind cleared again. I would steal, but not for the sake of adventure, but for money. I had to help keep the house going. I had to save my pride from the confession of failure.

Monday morning brought reprieve. My heart gave a glad leap when I scanned the advertising columns of a borrowed paper. Many boys were wanted: two as messengers in boot emporiums, one as a factory hand. I raced for the factory, anxious to be there first. Any job would be better than one in a boot shop. Visions of a crowd of unemployed boys jostling around a door spurred me along the street. I was the only applicant. The factory's need was urgent, and special ability was unessential.

"Ever been at work before?"

"No, Sir."

I did not want my prospects oamned by an unkind report.

"All the better. Will you start at once?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Come on!"

Thus I stumbled into a job which satisfied my dreams. I was to work in a factory where printing, lithography, book-binding, engraving, and all the host of processes of printing and its related trades, were carried out. I was to feed a paper ruler in the paper ruling department. The factory staff consisted of above one hundred persons, and there were dozens of boys who were not more than twelve months older than myself. I was led upstairs and through many floors of whirling, clashing machines, above which mechanics poised, making adjustments, or into which small boys fed sheets of paper. Everyone appeared to have a happy industry. The factory was well lit, airy, so that operators could pay scrupulous atten-

tion to tasks. There were no quiet, gloomy shelves and corners as in the boot shop. I was handed over to an aproned and spectacled head of the paper department, who in turn handed me on to the machine operator

"I hope you are smart You won't last long here unless you are You've got to put paper in my machine and keep your fingers out The last boy was so sleepy he nearly put his head in "

I grinned, assuring him that I was smart

'We'll see You are the only boy in the department This machine gets all the long, tough jobs The other machines are fed by the girls You can make love when I don't want you "

I grinned

"And if you can't feed, out you go Now sit down while I cut my pens for the next job "

But the head of the department had different ideas

'The youngest boy in the factory sweeps out the floor downstairs each morning "

Someone took me downstairs to show me my task Diligently, I set about scattering wet sawdust and sweeping away from guillotines, perforators, and spoiled sheets from presses and other machines Tradesmen paused to grin and direct my energies They permitted me to stare and ask questions Boys paused too, for all asked the same questions

"You're the new boy?"

"Yes."

"What school did you go to?"

"Albany Street "

"Where do you live?"

No one was glum and sallow and forbidding, and no one reeked of leather. Even the engraver adjusted his eyepiece and looked up from his task.

"A new boy?"

"Yes, mister "

"Don't try and sweep around my legs when I'm busy "

"Yes, mister."

'Like to be an engraver?"

"Yes, mister."

I am fascinated by the march and beat of machinery In the tower of mechanical babel I am clear witted The confusion of tongues, man and machine, suits my temperament, and printing machinery is exciting The hungry clutching at poised sheets, the forward and backward swing of metal and stone, the whirling rollers, the wet sheets thrust out, printed and uncreased, to be lifted over mechanically at the end of the journey, all these operations I could watch for hours The first time I viewed that machinery, I saw, above all, the proud, conscious boy who poised and fed in each sheet He was conscious of my envy, and attempted an effortless, indeed a careless ease, while still managing to convey a suggestion of work well done To be just such a proud youngster playing an apparent part in an important process was to be my lot My soul sang in unison with the crash and swing of the wheels, the pulleys and the oscillating iron tables

And the variety of people made for a pleasant atmosphere The best hiding-place in the world for sensitive folk is the crowd For the sensitive can tune in at once with the crowd where there is difficulty in accommodating oneself to individuals And in that factory no one appeared to consider me an interloper Everyone had a nod or a grunt of good morning as I swept And the young women in the book-binder's room were no exception, although their friendliness embarrassed me

"You are the new boy?"

"Yes, miss "

"Are you shy?"

I grinned in confusion

"Because I always kiss the new boy first "

I averted my eyes, confused The young women made much fun of the boy who swept when the boss's head was turned away, especially when I swept around their feet. I always speeded away from the women to loiter round a descending guillotine That clean cutting blade moving downward through the thickest masses of paper was the most hypnotic machine in all the factory.

"Hello, little boy "

"Hullo."

'Got a kiss for me this morning?'

Aw, don't be silly

'Quick the boss is not looking'

The young women vied with another in finding original means of teasing the boy who swept. And the boss had a heavy sort of humour too.

'Takes you a long time to sweep around the girls' legs, young fellow

He could say all this with a benevolent sternness which never failed to delight the girls and confuse me.

That morning battery wholly good-natured in the book-binding room was easier to run than to face the prospect of decades spent in dusting leather boots. From the first I was in my element. The factory had a social something that incorporated even me, the outcast. A variety of faces and dispositions engaged in a multitude of processes: each machine attacking a new job as day succeeded day: printing in different types, colours: a stream of new and attractive experiences played against my senses all the time. The longest day never dragged. I was at home for I was born to be clear-headed amid babel.

After sweeping each morning I returned to the paper-ruling department, where I was the associate of half a dozen girls who all were older than I. I sat and yarned with them while the operators were resetting pens. Being a year or two older at that age actually means that in some sorts of knowledge the girls were all a decade older than myself. Boys are clumsy, dull and stupid except to adoring mothers and employers. Their vocal chords and thumbs play them tricks. Youthfulness in boys has value only when expressed masculinely.

I flourished from my first moment in the ruling department. Maybe release from the boot-dungeon, reprieve from criminality lent wings to my effort and equipped me with emotional buoyancy. I was as if reborn and I had the spendthrift energy of a dog liberated from a cramping chain. I wanted to work as a fit athlete desires to play football. I wanted the joy or sustained movement. I yearned to show all the world, without

telling anybody in words, that to confine me in a shop dusting boots was a hideous waste of outstanding talent The operator placed huge piles of clean white paper on and alongside the machine bench and instructed me in the manner how to pick up a sheet at a time at rapid speed, and to feed each sheet squarely so that a steady stream of ink should flow down upon an endless chain of inserted paper From the moment I touched paper I knew that I was born to handle it I was as a mechanical feeder for speed and accuracy Also there was the joy of successful effort in my muscles

' You have fed a machine before It was an assertion, not a question

"Never "

"What were you sacked for? '

"Never "

"You can't lie to me '

"I'm telling the truth '

"Was it a printing press, then? '

"Nothing at all '

"Well, in all my life I never saw anyone handle paper more carefully or rapidly '

I know now that I was born to work, and toy with, and caress paper I have always been able to keep papers arranged squarely, tidily, unwrinkled My secret vice is to hoard paper I hoarded paper for years, believing that one day I might spontaneously burst forth into words, and afraid that if that great day ever arrived, I would have no clean sheets Paper is one of my religions White, any colour, all thicknesses, ruled and plain, note books, pads, sheets of loose foolscap, I cannot bring myself to part with paper even if I know I shall have no use for a variety I have I could dissipate a pound note, but never waste a shilling pad For years I stored paper as a bee stores honey against some paperless winter when the flood of ideas might be torrential But I am not a miser in its use, only in its collection I can't use the back of an envelope, I can't scribble on the margin or cram words perilously close to the edge or leave a phrase hanging to the bottom of a page by a hairline. If I have an extra word I want a clean extra



page I can't write on both sides. I couldn't do that in war time when I entered a Y M C A and saw at the head of the page, 'Use both sides.' For I hoard to expend lavishly I must have a clean white sheet even for the simplest note. But when the words cease flowing, and I eye the reserves piled about the room, I could purr like a kitten. I have piles and piles. Once I was a pauper, and if I become a pauper again, I shall at least have paper. For years I have gloated over accumulated supplies of clean sheets almost sufficient to border New Zealand. And I have quarts of ink and grosses of flexible bronze nibs. I would defend my hoard with my body. I am a parvenu of paper who invites only himself to the feast. I have the unused note books of Armageddon, and each sheet is clean, virginal. If I tarnish a sheet, out it goes. No wonder I was a paper adept. Later I could do the Three Card Trick, Slip the Cut, give the Mug a good poker hand, and the Confederate a better one. Give me paper in the dark and I will read its character. In these days folk would say, "He's got a paper complex."

Could I then feed a paper ruler? Can a duck swim? I could lift sheet from sheet of the flimsiest or most clinging material with astonishing speed, and feed each sheet into the maw of the ruler unwrinkled. It would have hurt me to outrage the smoothness of a clean white sheet of paper. Clean paper has an inviting personality. One never knows what a pen or pencil shall find on a sheet.

"You have spent a lot of time handling paper."

"All the paper I handled was the evening paper."

"You are as good a liar as a feeder."

"But I haven't."

"Well, then, you were found under a printing press or a paper ruler by the doctor."

I knew the pride of accomplishment. From that first morning, all the department hailed me as a prodigy. In all the years of the grey-headed foreman he confessed to never having seen so smart a feeder. I was at the head of the class immediately. Whether inward elation was concealed by outward modesty, I can't tell. The girls gathered around to watch

me, surprised, for as a rule they found it easy to outdistance the clumsier boys. A boy was only retained for the jobs that needed endurance, but I was supreme in finesse as well. No wonder my pulses beat joyous refrain to the song of the machine. Within a few days the operators of all the various machines at the factory and the boy feeders knew of my prowess. My boss boastingly told the factory what a marvel I was, and keyed his machine to higher and higher speeds to prove that he was fairly capable, too. Other operators came from their machines to watch me keep the stream of paper going, as people go to the circus to see the rubber-jointed wonder. Litho men, printers, other rulers, paused to see me handle paper. I was indeed a smart boy. The belting was keyed to faster and faster pulleys, and I responded to the challenge and beat the machine each time.

Once the novelty was rubbed off, my speed had unforeseen consequences. It became dangerous to the other operatives in the room. My boss doubled his output, and when his work card went into the office the management commended him. And my department head, who was also an operator, grew jealous of his position. Concern grew lest the office inquire why one man's output so much exceeded the output of all others. On Monday I was a marvel. By Saturday I was a dangerous freak. My operator, intimidated by others, hesitated to key his machine to a point at which its speed was a real challenge. I urged him to give me a real tryout, to test me to the point at which the machine could beat me, I wanted to show what I really could do.

"If I was working for myself. But if I go any harder now I'll become unpopular."

"Why?"

"I'll do so much work that the others will look silly."

"I would if I were you."

"Yes, and when you leave, I'll get a boy who can't feed and get into trouble for not doing so much."

"I'll never leave."

"They all say that."

For the operator and not the boy who fed was commended

I got scowls from the other fellows who didn't want to lose their jobs because a clever freak had arrived to feed paper

I fretted a little at his irritable unwillingness to test me at my highest speed I was young and inexperienced I see merit in the unwillingness these days If I had fed the work of three into the machine, my wages would have been no better than seven and six, and other workers would have been fired My effort would not have been commended in any way

The other rulers got a grudge against me They went out of their way to let me know that I wasn't so smart after all But it didn't matter Deep down I was exultant Thick or thin flat or curly at edge, it was all the same to me I kept the white ribbon of paper flowing along under the pens And I could perform the task automatically with the minimum of nervous and physical exhaustion I could pay attention to the varied and interesting world about The spiritual satisfaction of being supreme must have been superb I, who had so doubted myself, was a glittering success

When machines stood idle while operators prepared pens for new jobs, the feeders gathered behind a spare machine at the end of the department One or two sometimes even half a dozen, idled There, for the first time I really associated with numbers of girls, and they discussed their problems as though no boy were present They talked of young men in a way that made my ears burn, and excited my curiosity about sex for the first time I wasn't a full fledged male

One day in a spirit of daring they stripped me, to be sure

In silent terror I fought A yell would have brought dozens running to witness my predicament, but I understood there was a point of honour to resist but not to be a sneak They were many and strong They held me tight, stripped me down growing more daring as they continued I wriggled like an eel, but they giggled and held a royal inspection of me free of my garments

"You're not a man"

Then at warning of the manager on his round they fled leaving me trembling in nakedness under the belt of the discarded ruler They were fearful of their handiwork, for the

manager was a dour Presbyterian known for his strong hand against obscene language. When I held out in silence, I was accepted as a comrade. If the operators of competitive machines had a dislike for my prowess, the girls were merely indifferent. They were more interested in boys than in work.

Everything conspired to render me happy, even a pretty girl called Mona. She was no larrikin, neither did she hold aloof. I think she was the least sophisticated in the ways of men and therefore the more amenable to the blandishments of the boy. She was not yet weaned from calf love. I made friends because she was the most phable. We were given spare-time jobs together, putting brass staples in calendars. And Mona being the first strange girl I ever associated with, I fell in love. I cannot remember the colour of her hair or eyes, or the cast of her countenance, hence she must have been fairly plain. I fell in love not with Mona, but with girlhood which was represented in her presence. She was the first girl I had ever had a chance of falling in love with. Within a week I was looking at her and expressing myself in deep sighs. Another and I was pecking at her behind the disused ruling machine when she would permit. She was delighted, but scrupulously careful to dissemble in front of other girls. Indeed, she would speak almost disparagingly of me in the presence of others and show me petty favours in private.

I remember her deceit while I forget the colour of her hair. I wanted to meet her. She wanted to know what I meant. I heavily assured her that My Intentions Were Honourable. All the novels I ever read put it that way, so I plagiarized. What did I know of sex or passion? I knew its economics, that a girl had something to sell. I was grubbily innocent. Love was merely physical drill, like smoking a pipe, performed because men were supposed so to act. Yes, my intentions were strictly honourable.

"Will you meet me?"

"But you only get seven and six a week, and you give that to your mother."

Mona had a sound grip of finance.

"I get sixpence."

"You can't take a girl out on sixpence "

"But don't you like me?"

"I like you, but I don't love you."

Mona had read cheap fiction also.

"Will you marry me when I grow up?"

"You can't buy an engagement ring."

She had no faith in love at first sight unless love was financially supported. But I must have been good pastime, for she never said "No" but merely deferred judgment. She kept me dangling. Maybe she boasted about me to some other callow gallant, endowing me with all sorts of fancied qualities. She had that hair of unremembered colour in long pleats, and wore long stockings. Furiously, with sighs and glances, I wooed her behind the paper ruler, but I never lost any sleep over her coolness. The dreams that haunted me were dreams of myself as operator, as tradesman, well paid, drawing a few pounds a week instead of a few pence. Money in pocket, tailor-made suit, watch and chain. I was determined to work to the top this time. All I had to do was to keep the goodwill of the department head and he would speak for me when a not infrequent opportunity arrived. I finally went to him.

' Mr Stair, I want to be an apprentice '

"What to?"

"Anything in the factory "

"That's vague "

"Printing, lithography, paper-ruling, book-binding "

"The lot?" he grinned

"Any one of them " I was keen

' I'll speak for you "

But when I told my machine boss he received the news with disgruntled language.

"Of course, Mr Stair will speak for you. Of course he will '

I failed to see anything in Mr Stair's goodwill to be offended at.

"He wants to get rid of you as feeder to my machine," the operator went on. "When you feed, my machine does more work than his does."

Probably these assumptions were correct

Mr Stair spoke to other departmental heads immediately, since there was no opening for an apprentice in his own department. They had come to see me feed the ruler and were easily convinced. My elation improved my work. Nervous excitement has always aided me to clear thought and action. If the slow pace of the machine prevented me from spurring my efforts upward, I at least grew more anxious to keep each white edge of paper plumb to the guide. Mr Stair's girl was off colour and he wanted as good a tall as his underling. He borrowed me. He keyed his machine to a pace he would not permit my own boss to use. I thrust the job through in the way one would run a pleasant race. Mr Stair was an old man and had ruled paper all his life.

'How you manage beats me. Never saw anyone to touch you.'

He beamed at me when I fed for him and glowered at me when I fed for my own boss. He told everyone about how fast he had done that job.

"Too good not to be apprenticed," he told my boss suavely.

I told Mona of my luck and of the tradesman's wage I would earn. She was impressed and cultivated me more than ever, but she did it carefully behind the paper ruler. Accidents might happen.

"You could keep a home on a wage like that."

She told me all that could be bought. It seemed to me that we were as good as married. It was pure love, preserved by Mona's domesticity and my innocence in the realm of pots and pans and suites of furniture. She was merely a prospective housekeeper.

For a time the one distasteful feature of the new job was that I could not talk about it at home. And I was so full of new impressions, bubbling with the desire to tell all the world how a factory was run, and of how I was to attain dizzying heights. Douglas still asked hateful questions about my progress in the boot shop. At last I told how I had been suddenly confronted with opportunity to learn a trade and how I had seized the chance. I was congratulated for my judgment. My

lie brought me kudos My alleged quick decision was evidence of my mental capacity I was a brainy fellow

The world was smiling towards me In all Dunedin I had found the work to which I was eminently suited I would print or litho intricate design in varied colour The work was for both hand and brain My paper complex basked in the sunshine of a secured future

And luck brought good reading my way I pored over adventure and detective fiction until my eyes flickered more than the candle, and I was regrettably compelled to surrender the book to a place beneath the pillow Unlike many superior literary pilgrims, I wasn't reading for instruction nor for high-brow cultivation Reading to me was a happy carefree vagabondage in which I vicariously experienced thrills I was a dope fiend and it was my poison The fleshy lust for brutal action, the smash to the jaw of the villain—I revelled in it Nicely turned phrases were a quality unknown to me I supplemented my store at meagre cost Secondhand bookshops worked exchanges at a minor fee Neighbours gave me odd trashy sixpenny editions that they had read to traffic for them They wanted to change but were above effecting it themselves By taking a book in good repair and being content to depart with tattered, coverless, dogeared, and unvaluable volumes, I gained more print than I surrendered It was quantity of pages I wanted, not intrinsic value And my soiled books could be swapped again for other soiled books two for one I had real skill at the art of book swapping

At home also our circumstances had improved so that we no longer received charitable aid My brother went his way, a darling of school teachers A great future was prophesied for him To his secular triumphs he added midweek interest in a Bible class The real inducement was that the Bible class met in a comfortable private home As if any son of the very poor can escape the blind alley task! Mother was prospering She was cheap, industrious, obedient, and men who wanted offices cleaned were prepared to offer more than religious and charitable ladies who paid mother with a meagreness of money and an ostentation of old clothes and remains of meaty joints She got scrubbing and washing for full six days of the week. But

Rose was slipping. She had left the biscuit factory and had gone back to the streets, the quayside, and the city dens. I think she must have been contributing a little to the upkeep of the home, but I had no knowledge of any financial adjustments between mother and sister. I had a ridiculous delicacy in regard to the family budget, and was only too well aware of the inadequacy of my own weekly income. And suddenly I, who had once attempted to persuade my sister to sell herself for pence, grew aware of the shame and sordidness attached to these earnings. Knowledge of Rose's degradation came like a thunderclap. Before the virtue of money had obscured all other evil; I had been blinded by silver. But I knew one day that Rose was an outcast, avoided by girls such as the landlord's daughter. That made me love her the more, for I knew I was an outcast also, in a different way, a way I could not quite sense. And in her life of sordid economic promiscuity Rose had real affection for me. Perhaps I was the only creature on earth whom she really loved.

Once I tried to effect a change in her manner of life. Not, however, by discussing her profession.

"You should not stay out. You make mother cry."

"Mother! Mother ought not to talk about what I do."

"You should not say that."

"When you grow up you'll know."

Her hardness was daunting. I dropped the subject after that, fearing any deliberate action that might give mother pain.

Rose, with her knowledge of the gutter, also feared for me. She had uncanny insight into the direction of my footsteps, and wanted to save me from shipwreck. She had great faith that if I could be kept square, I might pull the family on to a decent footing. She had an enthusiasm for keeping me straight. Maybe she looked upon me to save her at some time from her fate. Weakling that I was, I dragged her down a little lower. But there was better food in the house, more and better clothing. Not very good food, or very good clothing, but enough and in satisfying variety. Douglas had ample materials for school, his clothing did not make him an oddity at the head of the class, and he played with boys in better circum-



stances and homes And he was not cursed with an eccentric imagination

I was going to be apprenticed At home, I expostulated upon the generosity of the wage, the joy of the task, and upon the magnificence of the machine with its oscillating stone or type, its rollers distributing ink, and the mechanical arms which flashed over with the wet sheet at the finish All agreed that I had selected a noble occupation

## **Your sister is Rose Porcello?**

THE time drew near when the vacancy which would lift me from the paper-ruling department into an apprenticeship was to occur My operator, generally cursed with a long succession of inefficient, muddling boys whose fingers were all thumbs expressed his disgust at my eagerness to leave him Actually I did not want to leave him for he was a good fellow, but I wanted the better job with the certainty of a broadening technical knowledge and a better pay envelope His bantering could not dim my extravagant dreams of the future

' Printing's a rotten trade '

' The wages are as good as yours '

' Yes but there are always more printers out of work Every out of work fool sets up a printing press and looks for odd jobs and the prices are cut to the bone '

"The best printers keep their jobs, I'll bet ' I had faith in some copy book maxims

"The man who holds his job is the man who buys the boss a drink or marries his daughter "

There was sanity in that remark, although I recognized it as satire But everyone took it for granted that I would become a tradesman and work for the firm for many years Even the girls accepted my future as fixed beyond power of change

"You will be working here when we are all married women,' one said

One night, I had arranged to meet my sister outside the

factory after work. We were to go together on some mutual errand. The factory staff spilled from the doors, and I went to her where she waited. We went on our way together, while the factory hands jostled homewards. And the next morning in the factory came that surprise.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

"Saw you meet a girl last night?"

"Don't be silly. That was my sister."

"That girl you met outside?"

"Yes." I repudiated the idea that I met girls.

"Rose Porcello?"

"Yes, how did you know her first name?"

"I know what she does for a living."

My legs weakened. My face burned. The world went suddenly dark. I lowered my head and swept at the rubbish in terror. The broom would not move fast enough. And all the machinery, the whirling, clattering machinery suddenly seemed as silent as an unheard, ticking pendulum. All I was listening for was the next phrase. For a man was talking, and I was only a small boy. And the man was hard, cruel, and I was emotional pulp.

"Never mind the dust for a minute. You know what your sister does?"

"I—I—I—I've got to hurry. I'm late with the sweeping."

"Take a message to her for me. Ask her where she'll meet me on pay night."

He wanted me to be a procurer, although I didn't know that word then. Shame, terror, rage, desire to protect myself, possessed me. I swept and swept at the scrap and the paper strips. But I swept for a long time without getting more than a few feet away, for some seconds expand almost into epochs.

"Will you take a message?"

"I won't. You're a liar."

He lunged at me and I ducked. It was a good-natured rather than a vicious swipe. He had no grievance with me, no desire to hurt me. He wanted to spend his money in our family circle. He may have been anxious to do us a favour.

"I'll write a note "

"And I'll tear it up "

"My money is as good as anyone else's."

I swept on, hastening out of earshot. That morning, I made a hideous mess of my work I couldn't feed Everything went wrong Sheets went in two at a time, or else out of plumb I couldn't keep pace with the speed the machine was travelling The jangling music of the factory was full of pain and shame and future menace It was hateful I wanted the right to lie down on the grass in the fresh air with my shirt open at the throat

"Watch your job You're like all the rest this morning "

"I'm watchung my job."

"Botching not watching."

"I'm doing my best "

"You're a liar."

"I am doing my best "

"You're one of the worst bloody feeders I have had. What's up with you?"

"I don't know."

I had to be relieved by a girl that morning

"You are like the girls having a few days off colour Better go home "

"I'm all right."

I had become afraid of the place I feared returning the next morning downstairs to sweep The machine which had caused my joy now clattered out the news that my sister was on the Town On the Town On the Town

The news spread from floor to floor. If Rose had done something of exceptional virtue no one would even have heard of it, but there is free trade in the story of vice Everyone loves to sneer at the sinner, and thereby to feel that sense of superiority that comes with not being found out. In a few days, every man and boy in the factory knew that my sister was a prostitute. A group of young men set out to question me, and I fled in confusion Already, I sensed that I would never remain to be apprenticed, for I could stay only if I was prepared to openly

discuss and joke about family shame openly ignoring hints and questions The youngest and weakest male in the factory, I could not silence questions by physical intimidation If I could have grinned and joked If I could have talked as though I were my sister's procurer, sales agent for her shame For now I saw the shame, where a few years before I had seen only the money Understanding came with a vengeance My sister was the chattel of any man at a price She was for men to use and then to sneer at The man who used and sneered was a hero and she was a young girl known as a whore And the more shameful she was, in the eyes of the world the more I loved her, and in due time she reciprocated We were birds of a feather After all, I was spared a similar fate only because of my sex But I knew shame

Gradually, even the women came to know Eventually the girls in my own ruling department The fact that I was the brother of a girl on the Town made me an attractive butt

"Your sister is Rose Porcello?"

How innocently and inoffensively the question was asked, but how girls watched me as I coloured, stammered, feigning concern over my work Yes, the flashing whirling machines sang of my defeat as easily as they had sung of my prospective success Machines have no heart, and accommodate their song to prevalent human emotions Perhaps the knowledge of the family guilt made me exaggerate the odium and the attention I was being paid The very speed that had made me an object of favourable notice now was a disability for I had been lifted from an obscurity that would have been a shield

"That kid's sister is on the Town"

"He's got a sister who is a prostitute"

"She's a Chinese whore"

Men started to grin and tell me sex stories, crude, hard efforts that I knew were the prelude to an attempted discussion of my sister Boys a few years older attacked me with blundering witticisms that left me in a despairing state

"Going to be apprenticed?"

"Yes"

"What is your sister apprenticed to?"

A few days sufficed to destroy my chances of remaining I wore the shame of a family sin too obviously I wished that we were all dead I winced whenever anyone came to speak to me I dreaded the inferences that would come After the girls of my own department knew, I was doomed When we gathered behind the machine cruelty and curiosity dominated them Besides, I was the faster feeder, and it had to be demonstrated that, skill notwithstanding. I was no better than I should be The biggest girl tackled me while all the others gathered in silence They were on the hunt

"Your sister is Rose Porcello?"

I was encircled, breathless and quivering I suppose I answered with some sort of guilty affirmative Not being a saint, I lacked the courage to deny my sister

"What does she do for a living?"

"She works in a biscuit factory "

Sniggers greeted that apology

"Is she working in a biscuit factory now?"

"Not just now "

"Well, what does she do for a living when she's not working in a biscuit factory?" They grew bolder as I quailed before their accusing eyes

"She's living at home "

"Ever bring anybody with her?"

"No What do you mean?"

"She goes out with men. doesn't she?"

Winks, smiles, nods, nudges from girl to girl

"Well, you go out with men too "

"Not that way "

"What do you mean?"

"We don't go to earn money "

That dialogue finished me I found something to do and slipped away. I had to free myself of the factory before I stifled to death

"Mr Stair, I'm leaving "

"What's that?"

"Mr Stair, I'm leaving "

"But you are to be apprenticed to a trade."

"No, Mr. Stair, I'm leaving."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Got another job?"

"No."

"I think you must have."

"No, I haven't."

"Well, why leave? Think it over and stay." Stair wasn't a bad fellow.

"No, I'm leaving."

He shrugged his shoulders and looked at me over his spectacles. He was elderly and respectable, so had not been made aware of the scandal. He was used to the stupidity of boys.

"Well, as you will, but you are foolish."

"Thought you were too good to last long," my operator said.

On pay day I collected my money and walked out, free of scandal. Free of the poison of malicious tongues. And, free of a job. The great opportunity had rotted at its core. I was down and out. And again I told no one at home. What could I have said? What explanation to offer after all my boasting and promises? How could I have told Rose? She had to suffer the pangs of her own sins without carrying my burden as well. And my success at getting the job I was leaving over a past week-end had given me a wrong-headed security. I thought that I could get another job and bring home my wages without anyone being aware of the change until it pleased me to let them know. But all the same I had lost confidence in myself and in my future. I had so much desired to be a printer. Like all the heroes of the books I read, I had felt my foot pressing firmly against the bottom rung of a ladder up which I was to mount to astounding heights. The ladder had been kicked from under my feet. I might get plenty of seven and sixpenny jobs, but apprenticeships were rare. And I was born to use paper.

Should I have endured? Was I short of grit or hide? Was I normally, or was I abnormally, sensitive? My brother would have carried the situation off better. His weekly attendance at Bible class would have exempted him from the family disgrace. Folk would have muttered "What a pity he's got such a sister!"

When they looked at me, I felt that they murmured "Birds of a feather." And I was a bird of a feather. Had I been a girl, money would have lured me. For when a person is hungry and fiercely wants nice things to eat and money for pleasures, and when that person falls out of the cradle and into the gutter, and when all the neighbourhood prowls to take advantage of freshness, vice is irresistible.

Had I been a girl, with my imagination, I should have been more vicious. And all that Rose derived from it was disgrace, poverty, and an early death.

## PART SEVEN

### The pickle bottle crook

I WAS desperate. The week was gone with the speed of light and I was penniless with my wages due. All that week I had looked for work. Every morning I had hastened to the free newspaper plastered against the board outside of the office of the *Otago Daily Times*. There I had assiduously studied the "Wanted" column. And the only Boy Wanted advertisement was one inserted by the firm I had just left. Every morning that advertisement sneered at my helplessness. "Boy Wanted to feed Paper Ruler." The notification haunted the paper with a vicious persistence. And I, the superlative feeder, was playing truant from work, distressed at the fear of a payless Friday, and yet unable to go back to the job that suited me. Not if I had been compelled to starve to death would I have gone back to that factory. And no other advertisement appeared.

Each day I trudged through the main streets searching shop windows for the familiar card, but nowhere were boys in demand. I was so desperate I might have taken work in a boot shop. Defeated in my attempt to sell my labour power, afraid to be seen loitering around the streets jobless in the afternoon, I went back to my haunts of schoolday truancy. I went into the hills to wade up streams among the huge boulders, searching for fresh water cray-fish. On into the north end of the city where the "Waters of Leith" had deep pools. I went to break their glassy stillness with the impact of my



skinny body. To the south end of Dunedin and the ocean beaches I also went. The beaches were lonely when the world was at work and children were at school, and the heaving rollers sighed against yellow sandhill. There is no place for self pity like a lonely beach where rollers sigh against sand after travelling thousands of miles along unbroken ocean. Perverted pleasure is to be derived by turning one's back on the world and looking seaward with dimmed eyes, sobbing with each toss of the heaving sea.

Seriously I considered suicide. Such consideration offered dramatic expression for a vivid imagination on one who was temporarily soured with despair. I lay on grass in the hills or on sand by the beaches, and shutting my eyes, saw the dead body of a boy washed up on the beach and discovered by a chance wanderer. "It's young Porcello," I could almost hear the words of the discoverer. Or else I saw myself churned up by the thrust of a ship's propeller from the bottom of the harbour and the other lips murmured words of pity too. "Why, it's only a puir bairn." I even saw myself dangling clumsily by the neck from a swinging bough in the bush around the hills. Dramatically I saw myself take a dive upon the rails before a speeding train. I wonder if many a despairing adult at the end of his tether commits suicide as much for the deed itself as for the escape into death?

Boys not quite fourteen years old are not in the habit of committing suicide or being long dominated by melancholia. I turned to the task of securing my seven and six.

And the one way was that of theft. Early in the week, when no job presented itself, I decided upon that solution. The decision was made like a flash, the performance was made with a commendable caution, which, I presume, only proves the more that I had the correct criminal virtuosity. There was no hurry to steal. I could steal as easily on Friday night as on Monday. With childish optimism I allowed no margin for error. I staked all on one effort. The men of action in the novels I read always pressed courageously forward to pass distasteful obstacles. It may be that fear caused me to procrastinate until the last moment. And many a person remains

honest a few days longer through fear of detection rather than because of virtue. On the Friday night, I went over a high fence into a marine merchant's.

The back fence of a marine dealer is not very romantic. To dynamite a hole in the wall of a bank and, penetrating, slug the caretaker with a piece of lead pipe before escaping with thousands, how many pens have done justice to such a theme? To be enthusiastic when possessing piles of crisp, elastic-banded banknotes is easy. There are many thrilling and inspiring manners of criminality, but I merely went high over a paling fence to steal pickle bottles, Chow Chow, Red Cabbage, Onion, Mixed. Even the late Edgar Wallace could not have thrilled many on a theft of empty pickle bottles. They are sordid and bulky and cheap and they clink together when they are moved, but after all there are such things as apprenticeship even in crime.

The night was dark, but not dark enough for me. City lights are never sufficiently dark for wrongdoers. The glow of a thousand lamps, well lit panes, and glittering sky signs, cast a penetrating reflection into even the dark places. Walk in an unlit suburban lane and on a country road on a black night. There is no comparison. I was stealthy, skilful in climbing. My fears of sneers at the factory never possessed me on a marauding expedition. Those sneers were an intangible enemy against which I could not grapple. In foraging I advanced upon a tangible objective. Physical and mental courage can yet be allied with peculiar mental sensitiveness. The average boy would rather have faced the factory than have climbed the fence to steal. I wasn't an average boy. I was swift, silent. If I set out as a coward, the coward always left me in the moment of action. There was not much courage or steadiness required to steal pickle bottles. As much as to steal diamond rings if you are thirteen years old. And I have always grown physically stronger in moments of stress. Stealing wood and coal I have carried weights that are astonishing. Strength apparently is as much of the spirit as of the body.

I let myself down upon a huge stack of bottles, and they clinked noisily. I made a hole in a back fence, thrust the bottles through into another yard, a place where no one lived.

I wanted ninety-six bottles Empty pickle bottles were worth a penny a time I desired eight shillings' worth, seven and six for wages and sixpence for myself. When I had my bottles I restored the paling and went back over the fence There was such a stack of bottles that with luck I could return in future weeks and steal without detection I had spied out the bottle yard long before, when once I had come to sell sacks stolen from a stable Marine dealers deserved to be preyed upon at times, for they repeatedly acted as receivers of property which they must have known to be stolen

I loaded the bottles into a bag and, with three trips, I had them carted to a place of safety I went home exhausted but content I had my wage, and I was safe, after having turned in the largest job I had ever done on one night Rose was at home when I went in, for she generally left very late, when male respectability could conceal its shameful contacts under the furtive cover of darkness I was excited, it seemed

"Where have you been?"

'Just out on the corner"

"Been getting into trouble?"

"No"

"You are white and your eyes are big You are frightened What have you been doing?"

"Nothing"

"You can't tell me"

"Nothing What do you think I've been doing?"

"You haven't been getting into trouble?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you want me to get you some money?"

"No—no—no"

I remembered the terror of the night in the Chow's den

"No, no, no, I don't want money"

"Are you sure?"

"What do I want money for?"

Looking backward, how alike we were! We were each in the social rapids headed straight for destruction, and each of us had a loyalty to the other Rose would have sold her soul for me, but not for anyone else attached to our home. And I

would have committed any crime in the calendar to keep my money coming home committed any crime to conceal from my mother the knowledge of my downfall Except Douglas, none of us had any loyalty to society Society had given us sneers and aches and old clothes and left-overs

"Sure you don't want any money?"

Of course I wanted money, but I couldn't take her money Not that its source was tainted, but merely that I couldn't sponge on my sister If I wanted money I had to get it myself, independently, by climbing people's back fences and stealing pickle bottles

Our home was ordered strangely As like as not, mother was absent in the evening cleaning out an office Douglas probably was out visiting some boy companion who was the son of a respectable citizen He saw a good deal of other people's home life He was likeable and no outlaw He was a bright pupil, respectably inclined, an industrious chum for any boy He was conventionally minded, passed his examinations brilliantly, and never read a book other than a school book If he got a penny for an errand, he kept it When he accumulated sixpence he banked it in the school bank But his social inheritance troubled him more than it did us, for he made greater efforts to escape After a brilliant scholastic career he became an odd jobber Life made light of his unremitting effort and denied him his place in the sun He worshipped success He became a success at school A great opportunity was found for him by a headmaster, but he was driven into a poorer job, because the better one necessitated a sacrifice the family could not afford Perhaps it was my fault, for when I felt he had to fight for bread, not for future prosperity

Rose went out, leaving me alone In the morning, I hurried off early to sell my pickle bottles to the buyer. The ease of my theft and the extra sixpence pocket money I had acquired, compensated for any philosophic doubts the mind of a thirteen-year-old boy might have developed There are nice compartments in youthful minds It would have seemed meanness of the worst type to me if I had ever taken sixpence off my mother when she did not want to give it to me Yet

I could steal the pickle bottles and keep the extra sixpence with pleasure and proud resourcefulness. And when I had stolen for the purpose of acquiring my seven and sixpence, I started then to wonder whether I could not steal to acquire a measure of wealth. The mind of a child is accommodating.

It must have been a bad time for work, for during the next week I did not succeed in finding any and I stole successfully again. One grows habituated to evil. This time I scorned the easy but bulky and slow pickle bottles. Loitering around and hunting for work, I wandered into a foundry and noticed there a dozen tins of mutton tallow kept for the tempering of steel. Mutton tallow had a saleable value at the soap works, and could be converted into money in a very few minutes. After dark, I returned. Foundries are generally windowless, their empty sashes telling of flying metal fragments. I crept through a sash without cutting myself on jagged edges of glass. I opened a door from the inside and carried out about a hundredweight of tallow. Again I was thoughtful. I shut the door from the inside and crept out through the window and disappeared with my loot. I had my wages early that week.

Still I rushed to the *Otago Daily Times* board every morning. There were few jobs advertised for which I, with wrecked school career, was suited. There were jobs at five shillings per week for a start, but I had to have seven and six. At home I ceased speaking of ruling, printing and lithographing, and did my best to divert all conversation to other matters. I became skilled in the practice of deceit. When stealing the tallow, I had spotted scrap brass and tallow lying around in the foundry. Whereas the first week I was honest until necessity drove me to the theft, I now started to prepare for weeks ahead. Besides, I felt that if I could get a new job, as I would very soon, it would be very nice to have a few shillings to spend. So first I stole from compulsion and then from a desire to enjoy the fruits of theft.

I found another smashed window in a second foundry, and on a Saturday afternoon, in broad daylight, carried away many pounds of scrap lead, brass, copper. I buried them all on a piece of adjacent waste ground. I knew marine dealers and Chinese traders who would buy almost anything I had to sell.

I stole a set of trolley wheels and sold them for two shillings. That every seemed ridiculously easy. There were plenty of places I could steal something from and more I could sell in. And every foundry of brass finishers had broken panes of glass somewhere. My imagination ran riot. I might even steal and bank some of the money. Stupidly optimistic and untroubled in any way by the morality of theft I was carried away. There were hundreds of pounds worth of rabbit skins and horsehair in places I might be able to break into. I could steal from one firm and sell to another and if I was careful what I stole it would never be missed. It never dawned upon me that my greed would overreach itself. To test out my new ideas I sneaked into a stable where I used to play during schooldays and carefully clipped a little off each horse. I knew the horses by name and the horses knew me and were quiet during my theft. Horsehair was worth a shilling a pound because cushions were stuffed with hair in those days. I sold the horsehair to a saddler. My head was positively and deliriously turned. I started to see myself a super burglar a bandit. Some day I would rob a bank and escape with enough to marry, to settle down and live happily upon for ever after.

My exploits were so fortunate that I had to have someone to boast to, just as I had wanted an audience to watch me feed the paper ruler. I found a friend and boasted to him, I exaggerated the financial result and I thrilled him with stories of incredible daring. I told how I had hidden beneath a bench while an imaginary night watchman had gone by. I was lavish with the frills. Stealing gave me financial security. Describing it provided psychological joy. My friend wanted to become my partner in crime sharing the joys and the proceeds thereof.

A boy whom I knew distantly bought one of those toy revolvers that were so plentiful in those days. It was a cheap little toy but it could kill at close range. I cultivated his acquaintanceship, for the revolver made him a worthy friend. We got a tiny cardboard box of ammunition and tested our skill. But since we generally turned our heads away and shut our eyes when we fired, we were very mediocre shots. Proud of his possession, and yet afraid to exhibit the revolver in his own home, he asked me to care for it for him. I was

delighted with the honour I went about with a half cocked loaded revolver in my pocket And I was only thirteen True I didn't carry the revolver about to shoot anyone but its mere possession was flattering to my vanity I could reach down and feel its cold hardness and fancy myself at bay, surrounded by an army of police and detectives Perhaps if I had been left alone long enough I would have become a boy desperado I had the imagination, the audacity

And all the time our family believed that I was working They waited for news of the day on which I should blossom forth apprenticed to a trade I had become mother's hope We would some day enjoy that trip to her birthplace in Scotland Rose too, was happy Did she dream of a coming day when I might save the remains of her life for a few brighter moments? I think not I think her regard was purely an unselfish love for me The family waited for a bright dawning while I forged a thunderbolt Never was I so dangerous to their peace of mind as I was at that precise moment in which they had come to trust me most

## **The Law reaches out a grim hand**

ONE day as I walked away from the place where I had concealed stolen metal scrap, my clothes bulged with stolen goods, I attracted the attention of a curious workman who was at work at the foundry near by He had evidently heard of the thefts My actions seemed suspicious so he accosted me He saw the bulges beneath my jacket and in my pockets

'What have you got there?'

Nothing is heavier than a guilty conscience, not even scrap metal I was coming from a waste piece of land The workman had no reason for interference, except suspicion There was no proof of evil intent even in the possession of a few pounds of metal I should have engaged in casual argument I can see this now as one sees with blinding clearness hours afterwards the devastating repartee I didn't argue I ran There were few

grown men who could run with me But I was weighted down  
He caught me

'What have you got there?'

'Let me go, mister I won't do it again' Do all children  
say just that?

In a minute I was in tears

"Should have cried beforehand!" he grimly said

"But I won't do it again"

"You won't get the chance"

"I didn't take anything from the foundry" I changed my  
tactics

'Tell them that in the office'

I was led by the arm back to the foundry premises The  
workers all stopped to have a good look at me, and chaff my  
capturer He was conscious of his triumph

'Saw him digging Looked suspicious Tried to run away.  
Didn't know I could run A little thief'

He took me to the office and my stolen goods were removed

'So you are the fellow who stole our tallow?'

'Not me, mister I never stole anything I found the stuff  
out in the paddock'

'What did you run for and how did you know where to  
dig?'

'I ran because I thought he was going to hit me'

"Tell that to the police"

I cried helplessly

'Please don't send for the police'

'We'll teach you a lesson'

Whenever I committed a crime people showed me no  
generosity Maybe a sullen feeling which overcame me in such  
moments prejudiced them against me And I didn't look suffi-  
ciently like a Presbyterian I was removed to another office  
while the police were sent for Soon a sergeant, a policeman,  
a detective three important representatives of the law, were on  
the spot to arrest a thirteen year old crook

'Looks pretty miserable,' said the sergeant as I cried

"Thought we'd let him off, the foundry manager murmured



"What's your name?" the detective got busy on me.

"Albany Porcello."

"Rose Porcello your sister?"

"Yes."

"Um. Birds of a feather."

My family caused prejudice against me in advance. We pulled one another down. I was guilty of both my crime and my social standing.

"Searched him?"

"No. Only taken a couple of pieces of copper from him."

"Recognize the copper?"

"I'll show you a pile of it in one of the workshops."

"No doubt about that?"

"None whatever."

"Well, turn out your pockets."

The detective didn't wait for me to comply. He plunged his hands in and turned them out for me. In one pocket he felt an article carefully and whistled before he withdrew his hand.

"A loaded revolver." The phrase caused a mild sensation in the office, and I became more than a common thief. I became a dangerous criminal. I was eyed with bewilderment.

"Wonder he didn't put a bullet into me," said the workman.

"You never can tell," answered the detective.

"What did you have this for?" he addressed me.

"I found it."

They laughed openly at my timeworn excuse. Every thief caught red-handed has found his plunder.

"You mean you stole it."

I sobbed.

"A boy with a gun shouldn't cry."

But I cried nevertheless. I was in a trap.

"What other places have you been stealing from?"

"None at all."

"Yes, you have. Out with it!"

"This is the first time."

"That's what they all say."

"What were you going to do with the loaded revolver?"

"Nothing."

"Where did you get the bullets?"

"They were in the revolver when I found it."

The workman was congratulated upon the cleverness he had exhibited in capturing me. Then, as I sobbed, I was hurried away to the watchhouse in the police station. There I was observed by detectives who had been told of the loaded revolver. I was a precocious infant. The fact that I had stolen some scrap metal was nothing. Every day some child was brought in for a petty offence. But the loaded revolver excited so much interest, that I even dried my tears. When questioned, I maintained that I had found the weapon, and I would not budge from my alibi. And I denied stealing the tallow. My head reeled from the grilling. I was attacked from strange angles. The detective would talk about my school, my last job, and then return to the revolver.

"Now, when you told us you stole the revolver, you didn't tell us where you stole it from?"

"I didn't steal it from anywhere."

"But you said you did."

"I didn't."

"You said you were going to shoot the first man who tried to stop you, didn't you?"

"I did not."

"Well, who were you going to shoot?"

"Nobody."

"If you had been caught half-way through a window?"

"Nobody."

"What shop did you say you stole the ammunition from?"

"I didn't steal it at all."

I furiously resisted every imputation, until the detectives almost seemed to believe me. But that underlying caution, caused by experience with lies and trickery, makes all detectives sceptics.

"Kept it for shooting tomcats and seagulls, eh?"

Hilarity greeted that remark.

A sergeant and a detective marched me home along the street.

in broad daylight. A crowd of boys followed us. The police sergeant turned to shunt them away, but they merely retired to a more discreet distance and continued tagging us. The crowd of children stopped at the head of the lane down which we went to my home. Boys weren't arrested in that neighbourhood every day, and the children wanted full value.

The sergeant would not let me go to warn my mother, but kept a hand upon my shoulder. Not that he was apprehensive of any attempted escape. He knew how children completely resign themselves when caught. Rose went very white when she opened the door. She must have seen the policeman first, and may have wondered whether they had come for her. But she saw me in tears, the sergeant's hand upon my shoulder. I remember her question.

"What have you been doing, Albany?"

"Mother in?" said the sergeant.

"Yes, she's in."

"Tell her we want her."

Mother came to the door, and burst into tears at the spectacle of her hero. Mother's deafness was always more pronounced in a crisis, and Rose conveyed the police conversation to her by means of her lips. Mother collapsed quietly into a chair, placed her head between her hands and wept, paying no attention to the police. And every sob nearly tore my rotten little heart out.

They didn't search the house. Their glance at each room was a mere formality. The backyard, my domain, was searched carefully. Not a particle of incriminating material was found anywhere.

"You'll leave him with me until he's tried?" my mother managed to say.

"He's going back to the station with us. If he tells the truth you'll be able to bail him out."

"You'll tell the truth, Albany." Those were the first words I heard addressed to me.

"I have told the truth."

"What will it cost to bail him out?"

"Ten pounds. He's only a boy."

Ten pounds tor bail! Only ten pounds A mere trifle But we didn't have five pounds to spare, not even half of five pounds But Rose had not lived in the gutter without getting to know its ways

"We haven't got to find the money, only someone to guarantee?" she queried

"That's so, the sergeant answered

"I'll get someone to go bail for ten pounds, Albany "

The sergeant, a friendly fellow, conveyed a message to my mother

'Your bond will be good enough for ten pounds "

Somehow the landlord had pushed his way in, and stood listening to the discussion He intervened

"I'll go bond," he said "Mrs Porcello never let anyone down for sixpence in her life " He turned on me "You ought to be ashamed of yourself "

As if I wasn't! Some good Christian people have the gift of always saying the wrong thing at the most inappropriate time They do not understand that even hardened sinners can be humble I was more humble at that moment than at any hitherto in my life

Back through the street we went The news of my plight had spread like wildfire When we returned towards the station it seemed as if every child for miles around had gathered to witness the glory of my shame and infamy And many an adult too Despite the sergeant's threats they followed us at a safe distance They were getting their thrill too The crowd grew larger as we went gathering unto itself every idle element Had I not been a member of similar crowds chasing constables with drunks and other evil doers? We arrived at the station, went through the swing doors, and I was swallowed up from view I suppose boys and girls loitered about for my reappearance and then fell away, one by one

But I have omitted something Along the street with me to the police station, sharing vicariously in my shame, had walked my sister, whispering words of courage She didn't care if all the world stared And as we mounted the stone steps towards

the doors, leaving her behind, she bid me to hope for the best.

"Never mind. We'll get you bail. You'll be home tonight."

Rose Porcello was a good, a wonderful girl, and a courageous girl, even though few people were aware of her qualities.

I had my evening meal in the cell, alongside a cursing drunk. He finally set out to batter and kick at the door. A squad of police suddenly descended upon him and took away his boots. The drunken fool attempted to kick again when they retired. I heard the thud of his naked feet. He howled and yelled in pain at the agony of the concussion. The police derisively jeered. They had taught the fool a lesson by leaving him free to hurt himself. He groaned in agony the rest of the time I was there.

Left to myself, I was more concerned about the humiliation I had inflicted upon the family than I was over my own plight. I could see my mother's dejected form relaxed against the table. And she wasn't a woman who relaxed easily. She had struggled and battled along grittily. I was glad I was in the cell and not at home, where in fancy I could see the dismal group in the kitchen bowed down with grief and fear for me. The sighs and the tears and the anxiety reached out to me in the cell. How we hurt the folk we love! It was easier to be locked up than to parade my guilt at the hearth-sides. I almost hoped that they would fail to find the bond for me. There were no accusing eyes in the cell.

But the bail was negotiated. My mother herself signed the bond, brushing aside all the landlord's efforts to assist. She would bear the burden of her own. Keys jangled in the lock, a bolt jarred backward, a door swung violently outward. Doors never shut and open quietly in such institutions. Doors only behave with good manners in well-ordered homes. Nothing tells an inmate of a jail how little he counts as the violent opening and the violent echoing slamming of a jail door. That was something I did not appreciate until later.

"Come on, sonny!"

I came into the lighted corridor blinking. The drunk with the bruised toe was still moaning piteously. My guardian paused to bawl through the barred loophole.

"Told you we would make you shut up "

Strange, but the action of the police did not strike me as unnecessarily cruel and brutal until a decade later. The drunk wanted to kick well, let him kick! The policeman laughed, as the drunk emitted a string of oaths

"Try a kick at the door with the other foot "

*Pain had sobered the drunk* As we went on our way to the watchhouse he replied with a moan

"Would you kick a wooden door with your boots off?" the policeman asked me with a grin

"Not much I'd have too much sense for that."

We all have too much sense to get into the other fellow's scrape The most evil can find occasion to "Thank God I am not as other men "

Mother, Rose and Douglas were all present when I was liberated Mother's lips quivered, but she shed no tears There was only a suggestion of incredible weariness, that weariness which all mothers who have struggled know when the world goes ill with their children

"Don't try to run away soony " a policeman advanced

"No, I answered

We went home, a silent, defeated group There were no recriminations Few words passed between us, for my mother did not want to upset me She clasped my arms and pressed my hands in a way that told me I was very much loved And that regard hurt, for it made me troubled at the anguish and disgrace I had inflicted upon a home already severely laden I had been through one ordeal and I faced another on the morrow She strove to cheer me

"We'll get you off "

But even that prospect must have been bleak for her She must have wondered if I was going to go permanently wrong at work as I had done at school She had been to the prison chaplain and had prevailed upon him to appear, appealing that I receive a further chance, and offering to act as an outside mentor if I were liberated She had connections, and was known to be honest, industrious, and staunchly Presbyterian, for all her erring past

I wondered for how long I would be sentenced to jail, if I failed to get off, but I didn't ask my mother nor Rose nor Douglas, though I was as anxious as they were to carry on the pretence that my predicament was light. However, my brother could not contain himself.

'You had a revolver.'

The possession of the revolver wrapped me in a glamorous notoriety and made my disgrace easier for a child mind to endure. Stealing pickle bottles or brass was merely a sordid lapse. Possession of a revolver was something that would cause excited comment among friends. It removed my case from the level of the ordinary. The evening paper had even devoted a minor headline to the revolver and obscure mention to the actual offence. Douglas could boast to his friends. Thus are children constituted.

Very late at night, the real owner of the revolver came to see me imploring me not to tell. I couldn't tell without convicting myself as a deliberate liar. Yet even in that moment, I extracted a grain of merit for myself from the owner.

'Think I'd tell on a mate?'

All boys have to attempt the pose of hero. The punished child, smarting with pain and indignity, says to other boys through tears that make him a liar. "It didn't hurt anyhow." But the boy was doubtful.

'What did he want you for?' Rose questioned.

I had no answer for that question. Any member of the family would have told anything on anyone to shield me.

"Who were you going to shoot?" my brother wanted to know.

'No one.'

'But it was loaded. Would you have fired if you had been chased?'

'I was chased.'

'But you had no time to take aim.'

Rose that night stayed home to console me.

"Why did you do it, Albany?"

'I don't know. I wanted money.'

'Why didn't you ask me for money?'

I hung my head.

"Why did you leave your job? You were getting on well."

"I don't know."

"Was someone cruel to you?"

"No."

"Were you sacked?"

"No. I just left."

"Why did you leave?"

"I don't know."

But I did know that I would rather go to the darkest cell in the most dismal jail for the rest of my life rather than go back to that job. Which shows I didn't know much about jails. Malicious scandal is an intangible enemy that even adults find difficulty in resisting.

"There must have been some reason."

"I don't know."

"What will we do if they send you away?"

"I don't know."

"But they won't. They'll give you one more chance. Don't be afraid."

After I retired, my mother came to the bedside and held a candle over my head to look at me. I pretended to be sound asleep. I had been lying awake recapitulating all the events of the day, and assessing the possibilities of the morrow. I was afraid to look into my mother's eyes in the quiet of that night for I knew myself as a failure. I knew I was making my mother old with the weight of my troubles. Conscience has always got the better of me. I have never been able to wear iniquity with an easy mind, even when my sin has been committed enthusiastically. I heard her make a troubled sound with her lips.

"Tuchuck! tuchuck! tuchuck!"

And she talked to herself.

She bent over me and tears dropped on my cheeks, and I had great trouble to prevent myself from crying. I was afraid to reach up and tell her, "I won't do it again." I had told her that many times.



## **My evil genius discovers another**

I WANTED in the court the next morning with my face shining with soap, my clothes thoroughly brushed, my boots glittering with Day-and-Martin's polish, and my hair neatly parted. I suppose we thought that the Magistrate might thereby be influenced, although, if sartorial rectitude meant a light sentence, I must have been due for a heavy one. The dim light must have obscured our care with soap and polish anyhow. In those days I recognize that wealthy relatives and a good solicitor are more conducive to a light sentence than all else, even than a countenance shining with soap.

In the dim light of an overcast day, I stared, trembling before the Magisterial wrath that was to come. There were very few of those curious sightseers who surround courts like vultures trying to pick entertainment from the downfall of other folk, very few of that crowd which must be the real criminal type in any community. There were few cases on the calendar, one or two drunks and my own case was the most important case of all, although I was but an unimportant boy. I was very much afraid. I had conceived court to be a dramatic performance on a grand scale. Had I been a spectator I would have been disappointed. Being the central participant I was merely confused.

A little yellow-faced man entered through a side door and elevated himself to a high seat. The least conspicuous person in the court on the highest seat.

My name was called.

The chaplain touched me on the arm and led me into the middle of the floor.

Someone asked me a question.

"How do you plead?"

"Guilty," the chaplain said in my ear, "Quick, say Guilty."

"Guilty," I muttered.

✱

"Very serious business," the little yellow man mumbled  
"Very serious Child in possession of a revolver. Might have shot someone "

"Been running wild reading penny dreadfuls" (What crimes are charged against healthy adventure literature by the Presbyterian')

"Decided to give you a chance, but can't let you off altogether Don't let me see you here again, or I will be more severe Sentenced to six strokes of the birch and placed in charge of the chaplain "

"And the revolver? the sergeant asked

The little yellow man used a word which meant the revolver was no longer my property, confiscated, 'estreated,' or some such word

'Come on,' said the policeman, taking me by the arm

Keep him for me in the watchhouse,' the chaplain told the policeman

I was led away through corridors to the police station by means of a rear door I was placed in the watchhouse and left to meditate upon my impending fate and police who were coming and going did their best to place me in a responsive mood

"You'll have weals on it, sonny "

"You'll sit on a pillow for a week "

"Got any ointment at home? "

"Have tea off the mantelpiece "

I am sure their banter lessened the despondency of the waiting period

Then a sergeant and two policemen came and took me away into a police gymnasium

'Undo your buttons, sonny "

I complied I had no option

"Climb up here "

I was spreadeagled across a high stool My hands and legs were held firmly The birch descended I suppose I yelled because I must have been ready to yell whether the birch hurt or not. Actually the strokes must have been very lightly

administered, for there were only a few red weals left on my buttocks. Policemen selected haphazardly are probably too tender-hearted and human to administer punishment of this sort. Only paid ghouls can cold-bloodedly apply punishment, ghouls and eccentrics—for I was to have experience of brutality before the day was out. The average man performs the task of flogging with disgust. We punish decent citizens who inflict cruelty upon animals, and conceal the names of human flagellators.

‘Did it hurt?’ said the sergeant as I buttoned up my breeks.

‘Not much,’ I lied.

‘Good boy,’ said the sergeant.

I was led back to the watchhouse. Actually, having served my sentence, I was entitled to be turned out into the streets, but I wasn’t conscious of my legal rights, and the chaplain had told the police to detain me.

‘Sit down there if you can sit down’; laughing, the policeman threw me a cushion.

The chaplain had sent my people home, and when the morning Court was over he came. He wanted to give me a lecture on the evil of wrong-doing, on the broad road that led to perdition. He had many moral platitudes to air.

‘Come on,’ he ordered.

I followed at his heels meekly. He had become my guardian by order of the Court, which meant that I ignored his injunctions at my peril. He was a man with a great kindness of countenance and charm of utterance.

‘I’m taking you to my home.’

‘Yes, Mr. Axeldeen.’

‘Did the birching hurt much?’

‘Not much,’ I replied with a grin, boasting a little.

‘Not very much. Are you sure?’

‘No. Not very much.’

‘I am surprised,’ was his further comment. ‘You must be suitably punished.’

I did not know what he meant as we walked, but I had little doubt a few minutes after we reached his home.

"Mrs Axeldeen is away," he informed me "I'm batching "

He took me to his study and stood me between his knees as he sat, and for a while he stared straight into my eyes I quailed before the stern benevolence of his expression

"So the birching didn't hurt? "

"No, Mr Axeldeen "

He got up, pulled down the blinds, and closed the door. Out of a drawer he fished a hard leather belt

"You must be punished when you do wrong "

I stood before him in silence

"You must be punished for wrong doing You know that?"

"Yes, Mr Axeldeen "

' Well, I am going to punish you

I had no knowledge of his legal powers, but to me they seemed immense The little yellow man who had ordered my birching had confined my body and soul to Axeldeen's care, and I had neither the knowledge nor the courage to challenge his right Indeed, I was so subdued that I was prepared for anything So was I powerless to fight

He stripped me of my clothes He was physically a strong man He was also strong with the authority of the law I was a boy afraid to offend further He was my moral guardian When I was completely naked he flogged me brutally, and without care as to where the blows fell He exulted in my pain His exultation was religious He found ample scriptural authority for the circling strap

And it was so nightmarish a proceeding I tried to dodge around the room, but he was always on top of me with the swinging strap And I never yelled I wonder if it was the dark room or his intimidating mien I cried, I grunted, I implored him to lessen the severity of the blows, but I didn't scream aloud while the strap was thudding against my flesh Why, it is impossible to explain I finally attempted resistance as a cornered rat might It was silent resistance There is something incredible about this memory but it wasn't a dream It left bruises on my skin for many a day Each impact of the leather gave Axeldeen joy It is easier to understand

now than it was at the moment, but still not actually easy to comprehension.

He flogged me black and blue to the point of exhaustion. And then, still naked and smarting with pain, he gathered me to him and with tears in his eyes told how the necessity for punishment had grieved him. He cried over and prayed for me. He took my skinny body on his knee and caressed me and kissed at my body as a mother might kiss at the body of her baby. Oh, yes, he had flogged me for my own good, and the bruises on my body hurt him very much. He talked to me of the folly of my actions and told me I had wronged my mother and, with his pulpit persuasiveness, he made me confess that I had deserved the punishment. He shed tears over my naked body. He prayed for me. He made me so ashamed of myself that I would have almost surrendered for another flogging. Queer, queer creature. How I would like to see inside the shadowland of that mind.

And then he lapsed into silence and left me naked, sitting on his knees, with the sun outside beating against heavily curtained windows. Terrified, I knew that he was planning something. Many demons fought for his soul as he sat in silence.

"Have you ever been out with a girl?" he asked me.

"No."

"Never at all?"

"Never at all."

He was a strong, healthy, vigorous man, and I was a skinny little boy. He was dressed and I was naked. And he was the law and I was its criminal victim. We sat in silence for a long time and I could feel the blood pounding through his body and his heated breathing. He had changed again, and I did not know how he had changed. He started to paw my body with his reverential hands. Over my arms, my skinny chest, around my abdomen, along my naked legs. No man or woman had ever done anything like that before, and I did not know what it portended.

I started to wonder if he was mad, and grew fearfully scared. He sweated profusely and his breath came in gusty

pants as though he were rapidly climbing a hill He kissed my skinny body, not once, but a dozen times And then he commenced unloosing some of his own clothes

And then he made a startling proposition to me, telling me what he intended to do I broke from him, fighting and struggling like a fury He didn't fight back, but merely attempted to exercise his persuasive powers He would find me work He would protect me from the police He would give me money He would give me no more floggings I ran away from him around the room I wondered if he would want to strangle me to prevent me from telling, and I cried And yet through all the events of the room, my resistance had been silent, and his voice had been subdued as though we both had something to conceal But at last, in sheer terror at what was about to be forced upon me, my voice swelled involuntarily to a shout.

"Let me alone! Let me alone! "

He was a coward That was why he had drawn the blinds so that what occurred might occur unseen The shadowed room suited the emotional shadowland he had entered

"Keep quiet Keep quiet

"Let me alone "

"I'll give you money "

What uncanny trick of temperament have I that such ghouls should have attempted to prey upon me Or was I, like my sister, reasonably attractive and very poor Anything is good enough for the poor They have no armour against the powerful

"Let me alone! "

"Keep quiet "

"I'll yell "

He put a hand over my mouth, but that prevented him from overcoming my struggling

"If you yell, I'll flog you until you bleed "

Tender, gentle apostle of the gentle Jesus "Suffer little children to come unto me "

He took his hand away

"And if you flog me, I'll tell everyone in Dunedin "

He shrunk away.

'Get dressed!'" he commanded

And then a fresh change occurred. He became friendly. He brewed a pot of tea and fed me cake, saying grace first. He drew up the blinds. He gave me a New Testament. He wheedled me. Made me promise never to tell. Said he loved boys. Asked me to come and see him many times again. And I knew I must go whenever he asked me, for he was the law. For all that I knew he was afraid of me, and something told me that he had grown to hate me, and that the only way I could conquer his fear and his hate was to submit to him and to become his accomplice. But that was too awful.

I went on my way overwhelmed, pale, tired and sick at the experiences of the day. I had been living in a nightmare land for four and twenty hours. A criminal caught with a revolver! And my eyes had been opened to sex. I had had the stark, naked, innocent purity of profound ignorance. A long time passed before I understood thoroughly the chaplain's intentions. He was a saint and I was a sinner. I was a poor gutter rat, and if I had told the truth I would only have incriminated myself. I would have been condemned as a liar and a pervert anxious to bite the noble hand reached out for my salvation. He was the law in all its majesty. How many children did he meet at the jail door and pollute? Or maybe he was stealthy and only attempted to pollute when the child had no social standing was an outcast. Boys are too simple and terrified to emerge from such experiences and tell the world of them. I was too ignorant to understand to the full the unutterable vice of his intentions. Long years after the Justice Department did find out and took action.

And Mr. Axeldeen, owing to my resistance, hated me because he feared me. He had now an interest in getting me out of the way. I did not see this clearly until years after. Within twenty four hours I knew arrest, cells, bail, sentence, birching, the slimy, cruel horror of the visit to the chaplain's home. My official mentor had become to me a creature of loathing and contempt.

'I'll get you work,'" he had promised.

Everyone was at home anxiously awaiting my arrival, won-

dering if the birching had cut my flesh much. But the exhibitionist was again triumphant

'Did it hurt much?'

"No Not at all '

When mother saw the bruises all over my body, she burst into tears. However I hurt her, she had no desire to see me cut about

"It must have hurt. How did you get bruises all over with only six strokes? Did the birch have tails?'

I never told anyone of the chaplain's bestial cruelty. For some unaccountable reason I never divulged that dread day's experience to a living soul. So great was the concern at the evidence of my punishment that at home I was greeted as a sufferer rather than an offender. My offence had been expiated by the savagery of my penance. People who love one are notoriously blind. We looked towards the future.

'Mr Axeldeen is a good man. He'll get you a good job. You must go to church regularly.'

Mother was ever a believer in the efficacy of churches. And everybody in Dunedin knew Mr Axeldeen was a great and good man. Everybody. If the voice of a small boy failed to protest, the small boy wasn't to blame. It takes unusual courage to challenge a popular view.

Out of the prosecution came a noble act. There was a good samaritan in the Presbyterian city. The man who had suffered by my theft was not happy about handing me over to the police. He sent and made overtures to us.

"I like the boy. I would like to give him a chance. Send him to me. I'll care for him and give him a good trade. He can start straight away.'

He would have been the fellow to look after me, that man with prior warning of my weaknesses and the real virtue of humanity. He would have added goodwill to intelligent discipline. We consulted my official mentor, the chaplain. He had the power of veto. Did he want to keep me under his thumb and make further effort, or did he make the decision with honest intention? I suppose he was honest most of the time



"No. I'll get the boy a job with a member of my church. And if he goes back to that foundry, everybody will know that he is a thief."

That foundry would have been just the job. Everybody would have known, but I would have been protected. I can see now that while we can run away from the shame of others, wisdom demands that we stand our ground and endure our own. Therein lies the road to character. The one place in Dunedin for me was the very place that was vetoed. I had robbed a man. He had taken a fancy to me and offered me work. The man was as much prepared to be interested in the boy as in the work the boy performed. There are good fellows in the world, human beings interested in human beings.

The chaplain found me a good job. I was to be apprenticed to a carpenter. I visited the man, liked him. found favour in his eyes.

"When do I start?"

"In a fortnight's time. We are starting on a big job then. You'll be in the way until then."

I went home overjoyed. All boys love to handle carpenter's tools.

"When do you start?"

"In a fortnight's time."

Fatal delay!

## **Satan still finds mischief**

OF course I was too vicious to do other than continue my criminal career. The open arms of the police had for me a fatal attraction. Respectability as represented by the prison chaplain was soon convinced that I was "rotten all through."

Maybe the critical wait of a fortnight was a fatal delay. Maybe it didn't matter. Perhaps I was doomed to fail anyhow. I had to be forged and tempered in many a social furnace before I could be acclaimed a conventional citizen, before, shall I rather say, I could school myself to resemble one.

Fourteen days spent loafing around brought me down, prevented any long drawing out of the first stage of my criminal career. Fourteen dangerous days! Looking back, how inevitable the crash appears to have been. For I was "rotten all through" and had to twiddle my criminal thumbs for two weeks.

In our street I was now a hero. Had I not been arrested with a loaded revolver in my possession—a detail over which even adults lingered, a detail that surrounded me with glamour? I was not merely an inconspicuous thief, I was a desperado. I had been arrested. I had walked through the streets pursued by a huge concourse of children. I had been tried, birched. Every guttersnipe and most of the respectable parents wanted to talk to me, and the fact that respectable parents declared me in social quarantine only added to that desire. It was not essential that I should hang my head. I could look down on the whole street from the height of my criminal elevation. A loaded revolver covers a multitude of sins. My standing was high. In obscure corners, safe from the eyes of careful parents, boys gathered to invite descriptive essays.

"What were you going to do with the revolver?"

"Just shoot anybody who tried to stop me from getting away."

I am sure I said all this with that economy of emphasis, that casualness which makes utterance exaggerate its impact. Murder without ostentation, as though murder were as natural as breathing, was the lie I attempted to convey.

"Would you have shot anyone that had come in, such as the night watchman?"

"Not anyone. Not unless I had been seen by them. I wouldn't shoot anyone in cold blood."

The age of chivalry is not past. It lives in the fancy of boys and girls, though rarely in their cruel activity. No one in any sixpenny romance or penny dreadful ever shot an enemy, not even the most hateful, in cold blood. In the heat of turbulent encounter, yes, but when the target was easy, all literary heroes showed a stupid and perverse chivalry, and left the bad man alive to agonize the reader and wreak cruel ruin among

innocent people through many blood-curdling chapters. But courage and chivalry emerged from all turmoil in a sweaty and bloody triumph on the final page.

"Only a coward would shoot anyone in cold blood."

In these days one might say a coward, a thug, or a soldier, although the terms are not synonymous. But diffident chivalry was tremendously impressive and did much to enhance the admiration and envy of corner gangs.

"Would you shoot to kill?"

"Only to wound. The man might have a wife and children."

"What did they do with the revolver?"

"They thought I was too dangerous and they took it away."

"And what was the Magistrate like?"

"Face like parchment." I knew parchment. Had I not worked in a paper ruler's. "And he said if I get into trouble again I will go to jail for years."

Why is it that shy, easily embarrassed people can enter a world of familiars and indulge in prolonged revelation?

The audiences thrilled and I thrilled as I pictured myself at the very gates of hell. The sinister, strongly bolted doors that all had seen were ready to swing open and admit me if I were not unusually careful.

"You would live in a cell with barred windows."

I wonder if I said "and feed a tame mouse on spare bread crumbs."

Every romantic jailbird feeds a mouse on bread crumbs. I wanted all to understand my desperate plight. A cough at the wrong time, a misplaced swear word, and the arm of the law would have me. I wanted to walk daringly along the edge of the highest precipice in the full sight of my spellbound admirers.

"You got six strokes of the birch. Did it hurt?"

"Hurt. They lay it on slow to torture you. They put you over a stool and one lays on while the others hold you. I'll show you the bruises."

Boys appreciate the visible evidence. I showed them the marks of the chaplain's strap. That made their eyes open.

"But how did you get bruises all over?"

"I struggled and got loose "

"Did you yell? "

"I'd rather have died I bit my lip "

There was no embellishing detail that I did not add Murmurs of admiration greeted my announcements of silence under pain I was all well in line with penny adventure To bear punishment such as I had known without a groan, elevated me into the company of the immortals I had the endurance of an Indian Chief They even felt my bruises

"And when it was over the sergeant said, 'good boy' "

"They like anyone to be game "

"Yes, they do "

I told of the drunk who had attacked the wooden door with a bare toe Everyone was delighted at the resourcefulness of the police Summary and cruel justice of that sort appeals to children Drunks always deserve all the calamity they swagger into But I was a hero The sum of my iniquity was paradoxically the totality of my greatness

"And I'm going to be a carpenter "

That made some of them openly envious

"Could have gone to work in the foundry, but I didn't want the job Carpentry is cleaner than working in a foundry "

I was a superb liar

'The foundry you broke into?'

"Yes, the owner said I was a clever fellow and he would like to give me a chance "

Children are born liars, but their lies are not very vicious lies Adults tell fewer but more harmful ones, frequently by implication, insinuation, or malign silence Street-corner lies are merely essays in expressionism The most retiring child swaggers a lot at times to make up for its very shyness

I was a hero with a fortnight's loafing ahead of me And the chaplain never came near after he had procured the apprenticeship Probably he was a busy man Perhaps he was biding his time Or did he fear my tongue? Fourteen critical days were ahead, but I was left to my dangerous self True, the chaplain had asked me to visit him regularly, but after the first interview only a positive command for a visit at an

appointed hour would have procured my attendance. Fear of his power sealed my lips. Maybe a sense of the disgusting, clammy nature of the visit played a part also. What trust could I have in him? So I loafed and swagged when a crowd of boys gathered to listen, I roamed around the beaches, hills, quayside in the daytime, playing a compulsory truancy, and read late into the night until the nerves of my eyelids twitched and danced the prose into confusion.

On the week-end prior to my commencing work, I was all prepared for my new career. My mother had incurred expenses to launch me. I had been given a pair of long trousered denim to save my tweed from rough timber. She had a piece of canvas with which to fashion me an apron. "An apron with a pocket to hold the nails." I even had a leathern belt and an old claw hammer we had come by somehow. And I had spent many an hour loitering in front of the plate-glass fronts of hardware merchants' windows, feasting my eyes on new and untarnished tools, deciding upon the order in which I should accumulate a kit as money became available. There were a host of small items I would gradually acquire for a few shillings, leaving the brace and bit, the planes, the spirit level, until I was the recipient of better wages. Saws, planes, braces and bits, a host of tools were my new enthusiasm. Woodworking became almost as fascinating a prospect as printing—not quite, for paper and the printed word were a cherished although never-to-be-spoken-of love.

For twelve days I had pursued an honourable career, during which I had committed no offence beyond engaging in all the lying that lent glamour to my experience. And on that Saturday I went playing with a gang of boys, mates from marauding expeditions for coal and wood. We played our games on a piece of waste land near a foundry, and then, tired, we sat down. I again lied my way towards heroism.

"Let's look for trolley wheels," a boy suggested when we tired of sitting.

A suggestion always popular. Every boy desired a good trolley. There was no fence between us and the foundry area. In a few minutes we were grubbing about amid heaps of scrap cast iron, searching for and trying to pair trolley wheels. Then

a boy more bold than the rest, maybe emboldened by my own vainglorious boasting, grew dissatisfied Trolley wheels were inconsiderable game

"Let's jump in a window and pinch some lead "

For once in my life I refused to take the lead I was the sober counsellor To boast was one thing, to fall again was another

"We might get found out The police will blame me "

Was it only that excessive fear determined my attitude? Probably But few children are actuated as much by lofty moral precept as by fear of consequences Children are realists, not moralists in making these decisions The child who refused to do anything pleasant because the action was wrong would be so pure and saintly as to be abnormal Morality is secondary to expediency

"Oh, come on We often go into people's places You've only been caught once "

But I, the boastful hero had grown timid I would have nothing to do with the raid The mental agony of detection, the physical memory of bruised flesh, were still uppermost in my mind But when I was dared, the challenge was difficult to resist Any boy would rather commit a crime than funk an issue

"You're not game "

"I was game enough to have a revolver "

That silenced criticism, but it was negative A boy went through a jagged window, and in a few minutes a door was open

"Come on in You don't need to take anything unless you want to "

I went in with the others Some helped themselves to new sets of wheels suitable for trolley making, some to scrap metal, one keen fellow to a few ingots of copper I took nothing But I was more than a spectator, I pointed out easily negotiable material

"If I was stealing I'd take that "

There were carpenter's tools in a moulder's department that tempted me, but I resisted, even when I found a plane that

seemed the very article I needed I had no fear, for I thought there was a distinction between my presence and theft on my part. Everyone came away well laden, and I went on my way with a satisfied conscience. I had not stolen a pennorth. I had not gone through the window to open the door. I was guiltless of theft, but technically guilty to the full limit.

In the mellow evening I was fooling in our backyard, tinkering around with some job or other, when the blow fell. Some workshop manager or watchman had visited the foundry shortly after our departure, finding the door wide open and workshop material disarranged. He had phoned at once for the police. And what more natural than that the police should think at once of me. I had a record. It never dawned upon me that the police would suspect me. With all my cleverness, I thought guilt had to be fastened upon one before the police could strike. I heard the heavy feet coming down the lane, and I saw a blue clad leg come around the corner of the house. I knew I was undone. If there had been an easy way out, I would have run for it.

‘Come here, you!’

They were on top of me as I erected myself.

“Nice little game you’ve been up to again.”

“What do you want me for?”

“Oh, you don’t know, don’t you? Where have you hidden the goods you stole this afternoon?”

“I didn’t steal anything.”

“Oh, yes, you did.”

They searched the yard and found nothing.

‘I haven’t done anything.’

‘Oh, yes, you have. We know where you were this afternoon.’

“I was playing behind the railway station.” I told part of the truth.

“Thought so. And what did you do afterward. Make a clean breast of it and get off lightly.”

I adhered to my statement despite a gruelling cross-examination.

“We know you broke into the foundry.”

"I didn't I didn't I didn't do anything "

"Who were the other boys playing down there?"

I mentioned the names of boys who had played on the area and who were not in any way implicated The police left, much to the relief of Rose and my mother, who had become concerned spectators Rose was indignant

"They think you are the only thief in Dunedin "

My own indignation was proportionate to my guilt, for I suddenly knew that I was incriminated whether I had stolen or not I was indignant on the surface, but fearful inside And yet I was also secretly proud of having misled the police—secretly, for I could not boast about my powers of deceit without betraying my connection with the crimes But my secret self-approval tempered my fear

I went to sleep that night happy and contented I would be at work on Monday I would keep away from all trouble But the police are not so readily defeated They have time and resources, and new offenders are innocent of their methods That night they searched around, attempting to find out some of the boys with whom I had been playing, but all their efforts met with defeat And then, as befits the profession, they fashioned a tactic in an attempt to gull a boy of inexperience into self-betrayal For which I have no grudge against them They had a job to do They did something they frequently do They played one crook against another Except that on this occasion I was the victim rather than the crook But I have no grudge against them on that score either I suppose if they gathered me in a little prematurely, I was doomed to be gathered in sooner or later What are a few weeks?

On Sunday morning they came again when the bells were ringing for morning church My mother was making the canvas apron that I was fated never to wear I heard the feet and voices I heard the loud knocks, and I think my instincts capitulated Somehow I knew the game was up And yet I hurried to the door to keep the sight of police away from my mother

"Come here."



As I opened the door an arm stretched in and seized me by the shoulder. It was all part of the police campaign.

"What for?" In accents of dismay the words fell from my lips as I was drawn outwards.

"We've got everyone of the others, and they have all made a clean breast of it. They say you were the ringleader. You'll get the worst sentence for telling lies. The others all told the truth."

"But I wasn't the ringleader."

How they pounced at that confession. How was I to know they were skilled liars who secured convictions by deceit? How was I to know they had none of the rest? I was well versed in detective literature, but that only dealt with murderers and burglary on the large scale, and taught none of the technique of detective subterfuge.

"You were the ringleader. They all say you were."

"I was not. I didn't persuade anybody. I didn't steal anything at all."

"But you were there."

"Yes, But I didn't steal."

"Say, sonny, better tell us all you know, and then your mates won't be able to put all the blame on you."

So I told the truth about the boys who had betrayed me, and at the end found that I was the traitor, for the detective had lied.

"That's all we want to know. Come on!"

Rose, Douglas and mother were on the step.

"Surely you are not taking him away?"

"We are."

"But he didn't steal anything."

"He can tell that to the magistrate."

That Sunday morning we went from door to door gathering up the gang. There were eight altogether. And all the parents blamed me. I was the evil influence. Again a great crowd of children followed us. Each boy was taken apart and asked for his version. One father made us feel happy at being under arrest when he hauled his son over his knee as he squatted

on the doorstep The policeman and detective smiled approvingly, delaying the arrest until the haunches of the culprit were black and blue The law was not anxious to deprive the parents of his rights Soon we were all walking to the station

"Off to the Sunday School," the sergeant put in

We went once again to the watchhouse, dismal heroes pursued by an elated rabble There was one other boy who, like myself, had been in trouble before

"Take a good look at Dunedin," the detective told the pair of us "You won't see it again in a hurry"

"I did nothing I was determined to assert my purity I wanted to be a carpenter

"You were not far away You old offenders must have been the ringleaders "

That was everyone's assumption Give a dog a bad name

All the first offenders were released at once upon their parents' bail Smith and Porcello remained in the cells all Sunday afternoon and evening We were given lengthy interviews with our people, which, in the restrained atmosphere, were more painful than happy Mother and Rose had abandoned hope

"You might get off," Rose assured me without enthusiasm "But if they send you away, don't worry We'll soon get you out again "

But I knew instinctively that they never would be able to I knew I came from the obscure and the socially undesirable, and that once the state got its hands upon me, I should remain its ward until I was twenty one I had heard much of the ways of reformatories To get away, I would have to escape Already, before I was sentenced, I was preparing myself to abscond from legal custody I had no faith in further magisterial leniency

"As long as we haven't got to sleep in cells for years "

The grim solitude of cells chilled my enthusiasm Standing around in the police station, herself spurned and frowned upon by police, Rose's face twitched as she fought to keep back tears. And the little pale woman who was my mother,

the drudge of a charwoman, pale and wet-eyed, stood talking to herself. Despite the fact she had counted upon me to be a bread winner she was much sorer for me than for herself condemned to her endless drudgery.

The chaplain came on his evening round, after mother and Rose had gone away. Civilian visits had time limits. I was the property of the state. The parson peeped at us through the peephole of the cell in silence, and then had me sent to him in a cell where I found him sitting on the slats of a wooden bunk. He looked towards me with a sorrowing benevolence that made my chin twitch. For a long time he stared silently and mournfully at me.

"So you are here again?"

"Yes, Mr. Axeldeen."

"Tell me about it."

I told him.

"I don't suppose you are telling me the truth."

Strange. No one saw any extenuating circumstances. There is no second opportunity for evildoers.

"But I am, Mr. Axeldeen."

"And after I had got you a good job."

"I would be all right after a start."

"No good. You are rotten all through."

Mournfully he pronounced his judgment. "Rotten all through."

"Maybe in a few years you will settle down and become a good boy."

"Won't you speak for me once again, Mr. Axeldeen? I will go to work, and I won't do it again."

"No. It wouldn't be good for you."

Would the decision have been different if I had been as accommodating in just as I was criminal in theft? I had refused to lend myself to a disgusting purpose, and had to be put out of the way. I was a danger. Complaisance would have effectually sealed my tongue. And a word, an explanation breathed to the magistrate before the case would have swayed judgment. Axeldeen had authority and respectability on his side. He was the law when the law asked his opinion of

juveniles. His intercession could prevent, his silence could convict. Thumbs up or thumbs down. I was dangerous to his peace of mind.

"You are a bad lot, Albany."

"But you will talk for me?"

• "Let's have a word of prayer."

Down on the hard floor we knelt, and he prayed for a very long time. He prayed that I might become honest and upright, and redeem my wasted life. And no doubt he was sincere and earnest. Who knows what a saint he was when the demons were caged. He prayed for me so earnestly that I felt conscious of how much he had done and of how poorly I had requited his efforts. At that age, the last impression is generally the strongest. He made me feel an unworthy sinner. It takes the passage of years to see events clearly. At the moment one's eyes are too wet to be other than dim.

Alone in the cell Smith and I boasted pitifully.

"I don't care. I'm not scared."

"If I was allowed home, my father would half kill me, so I'm better here."

Stone walls were a fortress against paternal wrath.

"We'll go north to Burnham."

"How many miles away?"

"Two hundred."

"And stay until we're twenty-one."

"I'll run away." My mind was already determined.

"And get flogged."

"I don't care. I'll run away."

That night I formed a resolution to run away that ended in making me a wanderer, a fugitive for many years.

"They'll lash you and put you in a cell."

"I'll run away."

In the night we cried. And in the night, a policeman came and looked at us, shining a light in our faces.

"Don't cry, boys. They can't kill you. The first two years are the worst. Like a sandwich?"

## Outlawed

"GET up," someone bawled at the door on the fateful day.

We needed no persuasion. We were unaccustomed to the hardness of plank beds. We washed. In obedience to instructions, we folded our blankets and swept our cell. Breakfast was brought by the station cook, a generous plateful of odds and ends in addition to a large pannikin each of well-sweetened tea. I suppose we were granted many fragments not normally on the police-station dietary scale for adult prisoners. Police are not ungenerous to youthful offenders, once they have been confessed and convicted.

Promptly at ten, we stood in the gloomy court, and the same sallow magistrate peered down at us. Smith and I were kept separate from the lesser culprits, who had spent the night at home. It was as if the mind of the magistrate were already made up; and indeed, how else could he have made it up? The law's duty is to suppress crime, not be foolishly indulgent to crooks. To deal with the effects of society and not to remove causes. Someone called out our names, one at a time, and we responded.

"How do you plead?"

"Say guilty," said the policeman.

"Guilty."

There was a long succession of pleas of guilt.

Maybe if I had had a solicitor, a point might have been stretched. But Axeldeen stood on his feet in the court. He had promised to speak for the first offenders. Promising to speak added to his prestige and to theirs also. The magistrate, correctly, had a willing ear for Axeldeen's advice, and parents were flattered by his intercession. He made a definite plea for six of the offenders. But the pleas were made at the expense of the other two. For me, he had pronounced condemnation.

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"Got him good work! Absolutely incorrigible and beyond control. Will accept no further responsibility. Further leniency mistaken in this case."

Those words definitely excluded me from further liberty. Probably they were a wise estimation of my position. Fortunately, my deaf mother could not hear, but Rose's eyes filled in sympathy, and she dabbed at them with a handkerchief. I smiled to cheer her up, and to give her the courage which I personally lacked.

The magistrate did his duty. I cannot see how he could have done it any other way. He could not leave a nest of young thieves wreaking damage upon the property of law-abiding citizens. Once he had been generous to me and I had spurned the hand outstretched to aid me. He read over the names of the six first offenders.

"To each, six strokes of the birch."

Smith started to gulp in his fear at what was going to happen to him. I was quiet.

"Smith is out of control and is committed to a reformatory."

"Porcello is incorrigible and has let down the chaplain who made worthy efforts to help him, and he is also committed to a reformatory. I warned you," he addressed me, "what to expect if you came here again."

"Come on!" said the policeman, not permitting us at that moment to make any farewells. There were other cases to be dealt with. We were marshalled from court back to the cells. I felt hopeless. I knew that I had lost the sovereignty of my own body. The door slammed and the bolt jarred home on our cell again. And we could neither of us speak until we heard the yelling of the other boys as the birch was applied. It seemed much more severely applied than it had been on me. I think our immunity from immediate punishment restored our spirits. Probably we grinned as the writhing backsides of our late comrades were wounded.

"I don't care," said Smith, safe from that birch.

"I don't either."

I lied, for I did care For I knew my wages were essential to the home I knew that the wood and coal I stole were essential And my mother would be broken hearted If I was a verbal hero, it was only on the surface Underneath I was ashamed and crushed And then I wondered how high the walls of the reformatory were I wondered if we would have to sleep in cells and wear the broad arrow And I knew I was doomed to restraint for seven or eight years I knew that I would not be hastily returned to my home And the resolution I had formed made the school seem more grim in advance I would beat at the walls of the cage I would run away

"I'll run away "

My determination intensified my fear of the reformatory in advance It turned the reformatory into a pursuer and an antagonist

"They'll hammer you with a cat o' nine tails Boys had all the horrors exaggerated

"I'll run away again "

"They'll put you in jail "

"I don't care I'll run away "

Mr Axeldeen came to see us

"Sorry I could not speak for you, boys Now behave yourselves and you'll get out soon "

I knew that I wouldn't get out, and if my lips uttered promise of good behavior, my heart said 'I'll run away ' Mr Axeldeen prayed for us

Our people were at the train as we came to our seats from the police station They were gathered as though we were going on a picnic My mother had a bag of fruit that had cost many pennies in a week where earnings had been depleted Rose had three pies in a bag But faces were dismal, sighs were frequent, and eyes were wet Curious passengers, our fellow travellers, noting us in police custody, smiled at us out of pity

' Be a good boy "

"Yes, mother " But I knew I would run away

"Behave yourself and they'll let you out."

"Yes, Rose "

But I believed differently, and my mind was made up.

"You'll be home again soon," Douglas said

But I knew the only way I would see home again soon would be by running away

Mr. Axeldeen turned up exuding goodwill and compassion  
Mother was delighted at the evidence of his continuing interest.

"I'll pray for you "

"I'm sorry, mother "

And I wondered whether he would when I ran away

The bell clanged, the whistle blew, every pair of eyes grew dim  
Criminal brats can have vicious love that rises above all evidence of sin  
Before the train pulled out, Dunedin grew blurred, nor did I see the flying country with a clear eye until we were many miles along the way  
For I wasn't much of a hero at the finish, and was very much of a child

When my eyes cleared and my senses recovered a little from the confusion of emotional distress, my companion in misery was nudging me and monotonously chanting a phrase he did not believe

"I don't care I don't care I don't care " He repeated the phrase because he really did care, repeated it to conceal his despondency

But deep in my heart, hope was already gathering, a determination was forming which conquered sorrow  
For already I had a purpose to concentrate upon I could see a gleam of daylight ahead  
And the speeding wheels sang of my purpose  
The metallic refrain, as it always does, echoed the song of the heart  
I'd—run—a—way—I'd—run—a—way—I'd—run—a—way  
For hundreds of miles, speeding northward, the wheels hammered out the song of my new determination  
I'd—run—a—way

"I don't care," my mate said frequently, abandoning himself to his despair

"I'll run away," wheels gave back the answer, but my lips were silent because of the presence of our escort



Thus, upon conviction, I formed a resolution that made me through years a fugitive from justice, skulking into corners when the blue uniform came my way, feeling, imagining, the hand of the law for ever poised at my uneasy shoulder. For I did run away. And when dragged back to punishment, to cells, and to detention yards, to cruel floggings, I ran again and yet again. Sometimes for a period, I won the race. Sometimes, when I thought I was free, the pursuer appeared to possess my body and return it to its cage. Sometimes I ran in broad daylight, with all the country crashing in hot pursuit. Tallyho! What a hunt! All the world after a human hare. A timid, skinny thief driven on by his desire to be free, and the crashing sound of the chase. Tallyho. Across plain and hill and river, sleeping under stack, under hedge, by tussock and in shed. Lying out, longing to have the freedom of the lark, of the rabbit. But hunted as mercilessly as the rabbit is sometimes hunted by the ferret. Running, running with the law sometimes in hot chase, or with the law apparently indifferent, but biding its time, sure the feet of the culprit move finally towards its net, as the needle moves to the pole. For I was an incorrigible thief. uncaged, a danger to society. Tallyho. I became the hare. If the huntsman could hear Tallyho as it sounds to fugitive ears. as it sounded to mine!

“Stop thief!”

Did that cry ever resound in your ears? Have you run with the man in blue running after you? Have you driven your scampering legs across country as though they could out-distance galloping horse and barking and yelping, if not very vicious, sheep dogs? Have you won to fancied security and suddenly found a hand at your shoulder, a voice saying “Come on?”

Tallyho!

What do you know of the chase if you have never fled with the hare? What do you know of the desperate urgency of speed if you have not felt hot breath and cruelty gaining on you, and walls closing around you?

**"Run! Run! Run! the Police!"**

**Have you been driven by that fear?**

**I rebelled. I ran away I was dragged back. I ran again.  
Tallyho What a hunt it was! For the law was after a boy, and  
the boy was a thief.**

**THE END**